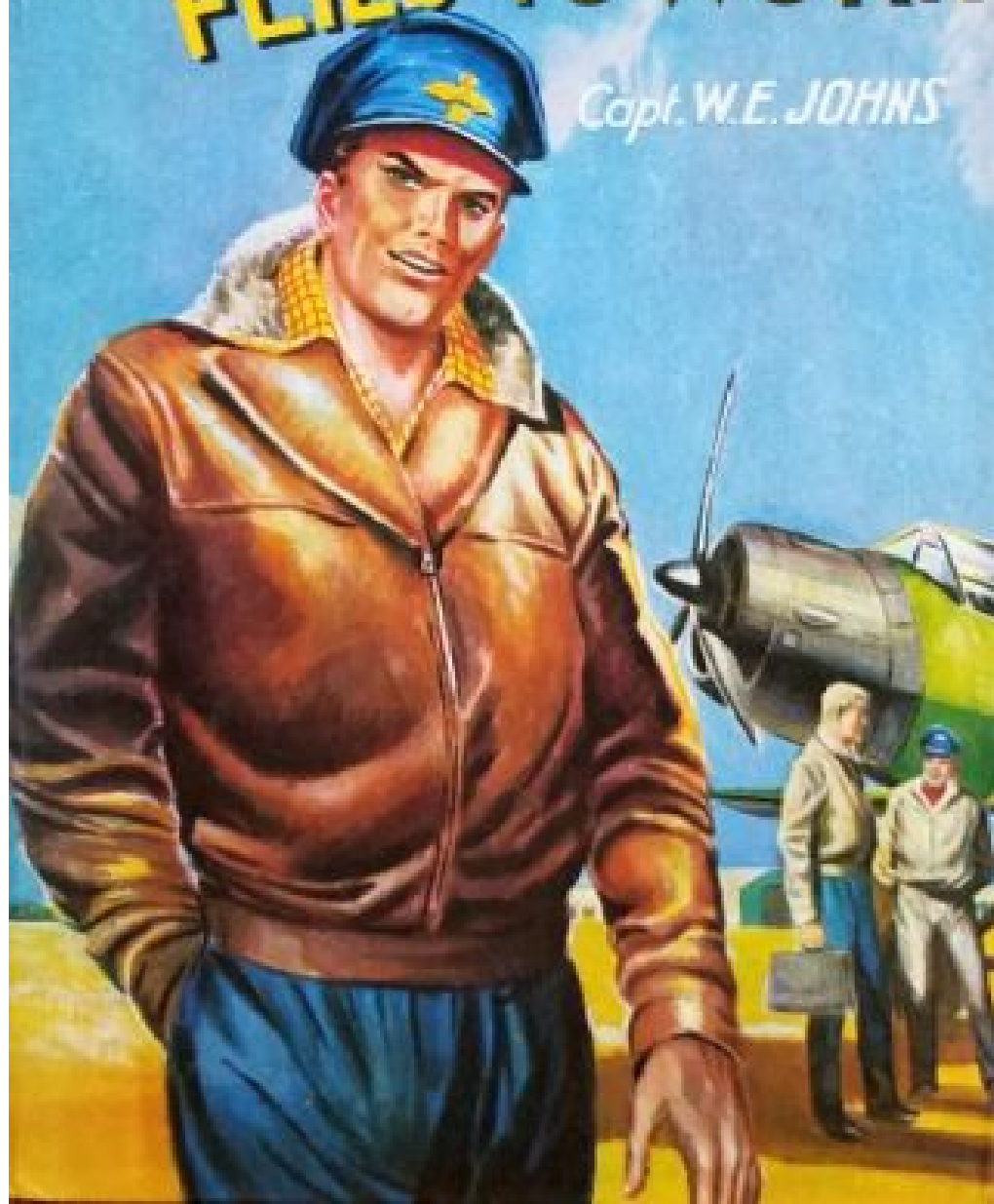


BIGGLES'

FLIES TO WORK

Capt. W.E. JOHNS



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BIGGLES FLIES TO WORK

*Some unusual cases of Biggles
and his Air Police*

BY
CAPT. W. E. JOHNS

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE CASE OF THE LOST COINS	<u>7</u>
THE CASE OF THE OLD MASTERS	<u>26</u>
MYSTERY ON THE MOOR	<u>47</u>
THE TWO BRIGHT BOYS	<u>69</u>
HORACE TAKES A HAND	<u>85</u>
BIGGLES LEARNS SOMETHING	<u>98</u>
DANGEROUS FREIGHT	<u>111</u>
A ROUTINE JOB	<u>126</u>
DAWN PATROL	<u>142</u>
THE TRICK THAT FAILED	<u>158</u>
THE CASE OF THE EARLY BOY	<u>171</u>

THE CASE OF THE LOST COINS

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND, head of the Air Police Section at Scotland Yard, looked up with a smile as Biggles entered his office and seated himself in his customary chair within easy reach of the desk.

“May I, sir, with respect, share the joke?” inquired Biggles.

“There’s no joke.” The Air Commodore pushed forward the cigarette box. “I was just thinking what a fascinating job this is. One never knows what’s going to turn up next.”

“Fascinating for you—or for me?”

“For both of us; but for you in particular.”

Biggles looked doubtful. “It depends on what you call fascinating.”

“Oh come now, Bigglesworth,” protested the Air Commodore. “You know as well as I do that if yours was a humdrum, routine, cut-and-dried job, you wouldn’t stick it for a month. But let’s not argue about that. I have a little job here that should be right up your street. For a start I’d like to know what you think about it. It’s essentially an air operation.”

Biggles lit a cigarette. “Okay, sir. What is it this time? Or rather, *where* is it?”

“Albania?”

Biggles frowned. “Iron Curtain stuff, eh. I don’t like that for a start.”

“Only on the fringe. Let me tell you and you can judge for yourself.”

“I’m listening, sir.”

“The principal figure in the case is an extremely wealthy Greek gentleman named Constantine Pelegrinos,” began the Air Commodore, opening a folder that lay on his desk. “He has lived in this country for several years. Before he came here, for reasons which need not concern us, he made his home not in Greece but just over the border, on the Adriatic coast of Albania. Near the small town of Delvaros he bought an estate and built a luxury villa overlooking the sea. I have a photograph of the place here. Actually it stands on a small promontory with low cliffs on three sides dropping almost sheer into the water. Take a look.” The Air Commodore passed the photograph.

“All his life,” he resumed, “Mr. Pelegrinos has been an ardent numismatist, and over a long period of time—he is now eighty years of age—he built up one of the finest collections of ancient coins in the world,

mostly gold and silver, of course, because they do not perish like base metals. These are worth a large sum for their intrinsic value alone, but their real value lies in the rarity of the specimens. This wonderful collection he kept at the villa so that he could admire them at any time.”

“How were they kept—as a sort of public exhibition?”

“No. They were contained in a number of specially made leather cases lined with velvet in which had been sunk depressions into which each coin fitted exactly. But to continue. Some years ago, when the communist revolution struck Albania and he realized he would have to leave the country, his first thought, naturally, was for his collection. He knew he would not be allowed to take it with him. In the end he escaped with only the clothes he stood in. Before leaving he tipped all his coins, loose, into an ordinary metal cash box—this was to save space—and buried it in the garden; actually, under the front lawn. The leather cases he disposed of by throwing them from the top of the cliff into the sea. All this, I should say, was done at night.”

Biggles nodded sombrely. “I can guess what’s coming.”

“Don’t anticipate.” The Air Commodore took another document. “Here is a sketch map of the house and garden. It shows the lawn. The figures shown are distances in yards from salient points to the spot where the coins were buried. There should be no difficulty, therefore, in going straight to the place.”

Biggles sighed. “I seem to have heard that before. Why all this fuss, anyway? As the coins are the man’s personal property surely all he has to do is put in a claim for them.”

The Air Commodore shook his head. “I’m afraid, Bigglesworth, you’re still a bit behind the times. The days when certain governments could be relied on to honour their obligations ended with the two World Wars. There is only one certain way to recover the collection and that is to fetch it secretly. Were it hidden somewhere in the interior that would be out of the question; but as it happens to be on the coast, in a lonely part of the country, to fetch the coins shouldn’t be too difficult a task. For obvious reasons the British Government can’t be involved. The mission would have to appear as a private undertaking.”

“I still don’t see why Mr. Pelegrinos should suppose we’re ready to stick our necks out to recover his precious toys for him.”

“He doesn’t. I’ll come to that in a moment. On leaving Albania he returned to Greece, but when political troubles forced him to leave he came to England, where he has lived ever since. He had long given up hope of

recovering his collection. One can understand his position. Being what communists call a capitalist he himself dare not go back to Albania. He was afraid to entrust his secret to anyone in case the person ratted on him and kept the coins.”

“So the box is still where he buried it.”

“As far as he knows.”

“It may have been found.”

“He doesn’t think so, for two reasons. In the first place there was nothing left to show where the coins had been buried. Very carefully, alone, in the middle of the night, he lifted a piece of turf, made a small cavity, dropped in the cash box and replaced the turf. Secondly, had the coins been found, they would almost certainly have come on the market. That hasn’t happened. Some of the pieces are unique and Mr. Pelegrinos keeps close watch on sales all over the world.”

“So we are now expected to fetch them.”

“Not exactly. Mr. Pelegrinos, having given the matter a great deal of thought, as one would imagine, has decided it would be a pity if the collection was lost for ever, as might easily happen should he take his secret with him to the grave. That might happen any day. Rather than this should happen he went to the British Museum and made a proposal. He offered to sign a document handing over the collection to the Museum—if they could get it. In that way he would still be able to see his beloved coins any time he wished.”

“Fair enough. Was the offer accepted?”

“It was. The Museum is in no position to make a raid on the villa, although as the coins are now officially their property they would be within their rights if they did. The collection never did belong to Albania.”

“You’re sure it wouldn’t be any use asking the Albanian Government to hand it over.”

“That, Mr. Pelegrinos is convinced, would simply defeat its object; for once it became known that this peculiar treasure was still in Albania the ruling authorities would, if necessary, tear down the villa and dig up the entire estate in their determination to secure it. It all boils down to this. It would be utterly futile to try to get the collection out of Albania, and through all the Customs barriers of Europe, by any ordinary form of transport. The only way the coins could be recovered would be for a plane to land, lift the box and fly straight home with it. It might turn out to be a simple matter, or, as we don’t know what has happened at the villa since it was abandoned, it might not be so easy. One thing is certain. If the raiding

party was caught—well, the members would find themselves in a nasty position.”

Biggles smiled wanly. “You needn’t tell me that. I take it there is a flat patch handy where a plane could land?”

“Unfortunately no. That’s the snag. The country around the promontory is wild and rugged. It means a marine aircraft. I can tell you that a path, part natural and part artificial, zig-zags up the face of the cliff. Mr. Pelegrinos had it cut so that he could get down to the water from the villa, either for a bathe or to reach the small boat he kept there. That, I imagine, will have gone by now. If you decide to have a shot at it everything will have to be done under cover of darkness. It wouldn’t do for a foreign aircraft to be seen near the coast in daylight.”

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. “What would be the weight of this money box?”

“I’ve no idea, but it can’t be very heavy or Pelegrinos couldn’t have carried it. Well, there it is. Think about it and let me know how you feel about it. There’s no desperate hurry.”

“You’d like me to have a stab at it?”

“Of course. Who better for such a tricky piece of work? But it’s up to you. It isn’t an order.”

“Anything could have happened at the villa since Pelegrinos was there.”

“That I must admit.”

“Should I have a word with him?”

“If you wish, but I don’t think you will learn anything more than is in this file. It’s all here. The Museum went thoroughly into the matter before it was passed to us.”

Biggles took another cigarette. “It’s worth trying,” he decided. “It’ll mean careful planning, timing, the phase of the moon and so on. Fortunately there’s no tide in the Mediterranean to contend with. I’ll think it over and come back later. I shall need faked papers, of course, in case I run into trouble.”

“Tell me what you want and I’ll see you get it.”

Biggles got up. “Right you are, sir. I’ll get on with it.” Taking the file with him he returned to his own office, and there, Algy, his second in command, being on leave, he told Bertie and Ginger of the proposed assignment.

With the file open on the desk and a map of the Central Mediterranean at hand, the best ways and means of achieving the object were discussed at

some length and in detail. On the face of it, from what was known, there appeared to be no great difficulty, the only big doubt arising from what was not known; namely, the present conditions at the villa, whether or not it was still there, and if it was, by whom it was occupied—if in fact it was occupied by anyone. Should there be no one there, so much the better; but as there were no means by which this vital information could be obtained, the risks of not knowing had to be accepted.

The discussion lasted for two days, for a lot of figures were involved and there was much checking to be done; the phase of the moon, the probable weather for the time of the year, and so on. At the finish the aircraft chosen for the operation was the one on their own establishment that had often served for long-distance overseas work. This was the *Gadfly*, a twin-engined, high-wing, amphibian flying boat which, with an extra tank, had an endurance range of more than two thousand miles—enough to see them to the objective and back without an intermediate landing unless there was a reason for making one. As part of its equipment it carried a collapsible rubber dinghy.

The broad plan was for the aircraft to time its arrival off the coast soon after dark at a high altitude. Cutting the engines for silence it would glide down to make a landing within a mile of the promontory on which the villa stood. In clear weather, with a moon, there should be no difficulty in spotting it. The dinghy would then be inflated and the aircraft towed closer in. Leaving Bertie in charge of the machine the other two would go ashore in the dinghy with the necessary tools for digging, recover the box and return to the aircraft. If all went well the whole thing might be done in a few minutes. Biggles, from experience, did not expect the show to go as smoothly as that; but anything unforeseen would have to be dealt with as it arose.

The tools were simple. A short-handled pick like a soldier's entrenching tool, a spade with a sharp edge, dulled so as not to reflect the moonlight, and a pointed steel rod for probing the ground in order to locate the box before digging. From these the makers' names and trade marks would be removed. A knotty problem was whether or not to take weapons. Biggles said he would prefer not to be armed; but against that was a fear that should they be challenged, unable to defend themselves they might be shot without being given a chance to make excuses for being there. It was finally settled that those going ashore should carry pistols, primarily for purposes of intimidation. They would be used only if it became necessary to save their lives. On no account were they to risk being caught with guns on them, for it

would be hard to reconcile this with the papers they carried in their pockets, stating the machine was on a long-distance delivery flight.

Three days later, with everything settled to the last detail, the flying boat took off and headed for its destination, carrying, for the overland part of the journey, documents showing it was on official Interpol duty.

* * *

No trouble was expected, nor was any encountered, and at nine o'clock the same evening, with the sun astern, setting behind the "leg" of Italy, the *Gadfly* was over the Adriatic, cruising at twelve thousand feet with its nose pointing towards the wild, mountainous country for which it was bound.

As far as the weather was concerned it was a typical late summer night in the Central Mediterranean region, sultry, the sky unmarked by a suspicion of a cloud, the sea unruffled by a breath of breeze. With darkness fast dimming the scene lights were beginning to appear on both sides of the water, Italy to the west and Yugoslavia, with Albania farther south, to the east. Far away beyond the "toe" of Italy a lighthouse flashed its beam with mechanical regularity. Apart from these signs of human occupation the aircraft might have had the world to itself.

The sun disappeared, leaving only a dull crimson glow to mark where it had ended its day's work, and night came quickly into its own. After a few minutes on half throttle the *Gadfly's* engines were further retarded, and on a course for the approximate position of the objective the machine lost height quickly. Presently the moon, nearly full, soared up over the horizon like a lopsided silver balloon.

"Now, see if you can spot the promontory," Biggles told Ginger who was sitting beside him. "According to Pelegrinos it's not much bigger than a big lump of rock, too small to be shown on anything except a large-scale map; but if, as he says, it's shaped like a door knob, narrow at the inner end, it shouldn't be hard to pick up." He switched off the ignition and cut all lights, which had been on while flying over Italy.

"That cluster of lights should be Delvaros," remarked Bertie, who was standing in the bulkhead doorway behind them. "If it is, it should give us our bearing. It's the only place of any size in the district."

With only the soft sighing of displaced air the aircraft continued to slip off altitude, always drawing nearer to the deeply indented coast. The moon helped to brighten the picture, but it was not yet high enough to penetrate the irregular line of gloom which followed the base of the cliffs.

“I made a slight miscalculation in the timing,” muttered Biggles. “I didn’t allow enough for the height of the mountains in the interior. No matter. We’re in no hurry.”

Two or three minutes passed. “I think I’ve got it,” said Ginger, peering down and ahead. “You’re nearly dead on. Left a little—little more—that’s it. I can see only one bit of land sticking out, so that must be it. There’s a light close behind it. Could be coming from the villa.” He went on sharply: “There’s another light passing behind it now—I’d say the headlights of a car on a road.”

“I’m with you,” returned Biggles. “Confound it. If that light is at the villa it can only mean the place is occupied.”

“Not so good,” murmured Bertie.

“I suppose it was asking too much to expect to find the place empty,” replied Biggles. “All right. This is it. Stand by. I’m going down.”

There was no more talking. The flying boat, dropping now at only a little faster than stalling speed to reduce noise to a minimum, closed with the sea. A final “S” turn, and with the bows pointing to the objective the keel kissed the water which, clinging to it, quickly brought it to a stop, rocking gently, something less than a quarter of a mile from the coast.

“Jolly good, old boy,” breathed Bertie.

“Don’t talk—listen,” ordered Biggles. “We should soon know if we’ve been seen.”

They sat motionless, listening intently, while the ripples they had made crept languidly to the shore, to die against the rocks. The profound hush of a sea at rest settled on the scene. They waited for perhaps ten minutes, eyes on the cliff in front, the only direction from which, as they were alone on the water, danger could come.

“Okay,” said Biggles at last. “Let’s get the dinghy out. Quietly does it. Sounds will carry a long way on a night like this.”

To get the little rubber boat inflated and ready for action took only a few minutes. The tools were put on board. Biggles and Ginger got in, and picking up the paddles began towing the *Gadfly* closer to the cliff. This, with no wind and no sea running, presented no difficulty, and very soon the flying boat lay like a resting gull within the shadow of the land. Still no sound came from the shore; but the height of the cliff would have prevented any lights above from being seen, should there be any.

Biggles’ last words to Bertie, before he cast off, were: “Start up if you hear us coming back in a hurry.”

It took a little while to find the mooring platform said to be at the foot of the path, and when it was found, protected by a buttress of rock, it raised misgivings. There was a boat already there, a sailing dinghy fitted with an outboard motor.

“Looks as if the path is still used,” whispered Biggles. “Must be someone living in the villa. Hello, what’s this?” A notice had been painted on a flat piece of rock. The language was foreign. “Probably means private, or landing forbidden,” concluded Biggles. “Let’s press on up Jacob’s ladder.” They picked up the tools.

The ascent was steep but otherwise easy, steps having been cut in what originally must have been the most difficult places. Biggles, his face wet with perspiration, was the first to reach the top. He stopped abruptly, staring at something in front of him.

“Anything wrong?” questioned Ginger anxiously, from behind.

“Take a look.”

Ginger looked, and was speechless with dismay. It was not so much that lights were showing at several windows of the villa. It was the lawn, or what had been the lawn. It was no longer the flat area of short grass they had naturally expected to find. Unattended, it had become an overgrown jungle of rank weeds and bushes.

“I suppose we should have been prepared for this,” muttered Biggles, bitterly.

“How are we to measure distances accurately through all this stuff?”

“We shall have to try.”

Then, as they crouched there, another hazard presented itself. Round the end of the villa, within thirty yards of them, strolled a man in uniform, a rifle on his shoulder. At the same time another man, similarly accoutred, appeared from the opposite end. They met at the bottom of the steps that led up to the front door. After a casual conversation lasting about five minutes each man turned about and retraced his steps.

“So there’s a guard on duty,” breathed Biggles. “Guarding what, I wonder? The place must be a naval or military post, or maybe a coastguard station. It’s going to make things awkward. However, let’s get on with the job. We shall have to work quietly, ready to drop flat if those men come back, as I imagine they will at regular intervals.”

With eyes and ears alert they moved forward, taking the easiest course through the shrubs. In this way, without anything happening, they reached a point about ten yards, as near as could be judged, from, and directly in front of, the steps.

“Pelegrinos gave the distance as ten yards and only a foot under the ground, so the box can’t be far away,” whispered Biggles. “You keep watch while I probe.” So saying he went to work.

Time passed. There were several false hopes as the steel rod struck a root or a stone. Twice operations had to be suspended on the appearance of the guards, who behaved as before. As soon as they had gone the work was resumed. At last the rod struck something which Biggles thought felt and sounded like metal. Dropping the probe he started to dig, tearing away roots with his hands. Having removed the top soil he dropped on his knees and groped, throwing out handfuls of dirt.

“This is it,” he panted. “I’ve got the handle.” He started to pull, but stopped, falling flat, when somewhere near at hand words of command were rapped out. They waited. No one appeared. “Must be changing the guard,” said Biggles tersely, returning to his task. Again on his knees, hands reaching down into the hole he had made, he pulled hard, straining, as if the box was heavy. With the top of it just showing above the surface he went over backwards, apparently still holding it. There was a metallic rattle.

“What’s happened?” asked Ginger breathlessly.

“The bottom’s fallen out of the box. Rotten with damp, or salt in the ground.”

“You mean——”

“The coins are at the bottom of the hole.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Get ’em out.”

“We’ve nothing to put ’em in.”

Biggles had already flung off his jacket. He now took off his shirt, tying the sleeves at the wrists to form, as it were, two bags. “Hold this open while I get the boodle,” he ordered.

That was now the position, Ginger holding open the sleeves of the shirt, first one and then the other for balance, while Biggles, lying flat, brought up the coins in his hands and dropped them in. The difficulty was to do this without making a noise. The coins would chink together. The sleeves began to bulge.

“This is going to bust open any minute,” warned Ginger.

“Nearly finished.”

“Leave the rest.”

“I’m not leaving one if I can help it . . . there you are, I think that’s the lot.”

Again they both went flat as a new danger threatened. Somewhere a man was calling and whistling, obviously to a dog. Ginger froze. He had no fear of being seen. What he was afraid of was the dog's nose.

Presently a guard appeared, the dog at his heels. He met his companion, turned about, and had nearly reached the end of the villa when the dog growled. The man said something to it in a tone of voice that suggested he was not interested and walked on. The dog stood still. When it moved, Ginger, peering through a bush, lost sight of it.

"Let's get out of this," he breathed urgently.

"You go first. I'll guard the rear."

Abandoning the tools the retreat towards the cliff path began, on all fours, Ginger dragging the shirt. All seemed to be going well and they had nearly reached the top of the narrow descent when the dog appeared. It was in fact a hound of sorts. It raised its head and bayed. Biggles whipped out his gun. To Ginger he snapped: "Go on. Don't stop for anything. Leave this to me."

Ginger slung his awkward burden over a shoulder and hurried on, leaving Biggles and the hound facing each other from a distance of a few yards, the animal prancing and making a lot of noise yet for some reason hesitating to attack. Such an uproar could not fail to be heard at the villa, as was proved by several voices calling to each other. The front door was thrown open letting out a stream of light and revealing a figure in a uniform resplendent with gold braid. Biggles was more concerned with a man who came crashing towards him shouting, although what he was talking about, and to whom, Biggles, not understanding the language, had no idea. He was presumably the owner of the dog, for it stopped baying and bounded to meet him.

Biggles snatched the opportunity to back swiftly to the path. As he took the first step down a firearm flashed and a bullet ploughed through the bushes. Biggles fired a shot into the air, his purpose being to let the man know he was armed and so keep him at a distance; which it did, for the man disappeared as he ducked into the bushes.

Biggles bolted down the track at a speed which in ordinary circumstances he would have said was dangerous. What was happening above he could now only guess, but judging from the commotion a general alarm had been raised, as was inevitable. When he was half-way down he heard Bertie start the engines, and by the time he had reached the bottom the machine had come right in, with Ginger holding it by the bows to prevent it from bumping against the rocks.

“Get aboard,” rapped out Biggles as he dashed onto the scene.

Ginger obeyed. Biggles followed and thrust the aircraft clear, none too soon, for loose pieces of rock bouncing down the cliff told their own story. One or two shots were fired, but the shooting was wild and they did no damage.

The end was in the nature of anti-climax. In the scramble into the cabin Ginger tripped over the shirt and fell. One of the sleeves burst, scattering coins all over the floor. Biggles was shouting to Bertie, although by that time the machine was churning round to face the open sea. Within a minute its keel was tearing a gash in the surface of the tranquil water. Another, and it was airborne, turning as it climbed, to present a difficult target. If the aircraft was fired on nothing was known of it.

Biggles, his face streaked with grime and sweat, looked at Ginger and grinned. “How about that for a picnic? Get me a drink. I need one. Then you’d better pick up those tiddlywinks.” He went forward and joined Bertie in the cockpit.

THE CASE OF THE OLD MASTERS

BIGGLES, at his desk at Air Police Headquarters, replaced the intercom telephone receiver and turned questioning eyes to his assistant pilots who were in the office. "Any of you been in mischief?" he inquired seriously.

There was a chorus of denials.

"That was the Air Commodore speaking," explained Biggles. "The Chief Commissioner is with him and wants to see me. That's never happened before. I wondered if he'd come to rap my knuckles. See you presently." He left the room.

His fears were soon dispelled. "Sit down," invited the Chief as Biggles entered. "I want to ask you a question," he went on as Biggles obeyed. "As you must know there has recently been a new angle of crime to give a lot of people headaches. I'm referring to the increasing number of thefts of valuable works of art. There was another case last night when three priceless paintings disappeared from a private exhibition in London. From the way these raids are carried out it's almost certain they're the work of one specialized gang, and behind them is a man not only with brains but with a considerable knowledge of pictures. The first question to arise is, where are these paintings going?"

"I can only suppose, sir, there must suddenly be a market for them somewhere, which suggests they're all going to the same receiver."

"I agree. But no ordinary receiver would buy an object that could so easily be recognized. Gold can be melted down. Gems can be reset. But there is nothing you can do with a picture except leave it as it is, for only in its original condition has it any value. I can't imagine anyone in this country showing, much less trying to sell, a well-known painting that had been stolen."

"They may be going abroad, sir."

"Exactly. That brings me to the question I came here to ask. You're the air expert. Would it be difficult to fly these pictures out of the country?"

"Far from being difficult, sir, it would be comparatively easy."

The Chief's eyes opened wide. "You astonish me. The airports have been alerted. All large parcels, and a bundle of paintings would make a very large parcel, are being examined."

"I wasn't thinking of public air transport, sir. I'm sure that to get these stolen pictures through Customs would be next to impossible. I had in mind

a private aircraft, possibly one acquired for this very purpose.”

“Then what are the air police for? Have you done anything about last night’s robbery?”

“No, sir. As the theft took place in London and there was no suggestion of aviation being involved I took it to be a job for ‘C’ Division. We’re doing our best to prevent illegal air operations but the difficulties are enormous. My colleagues on the Continent tell me that smuggling by private aircraft goes on all the time and there’s little they can do to prevent it.”

The Chief frowned. “This is alarming. What *are* these difficulties?”

“If you’ll bear with me for a moment, sir, I’ll explain. Consider my own position. I have three assistants to help me to cover not just a single frontier but some two thousand miles of coastline. Even if we maintained a non-stop patrol it’s unlikely we’d spot a night-flying aircraft showing no lights. We can’t be at every altitude from the ground up.”

“I appreciate that. Then what do you do?”

“We rely chiefly on radar stations for information. If they pick up an unidentified plane that ignores signals they tip us off. But of course a pilot who knew his job would be able to dodge radar by coming in low, under the beam. Enemy pilots did that in the war. But they could be heard, and there were ground defences to deal with them. Today there’s nothing to prevent a machine creeping in low, and with hardly a sound, having cut its engine at a high altitude. Even if I intercepted such an intruder what could I do about it? I have no authority to shoot down a suspect who might turn out to be an innocent man whose navigation lights and radio equipment were out of order. We don’t carry guns, anyway, so the circumstances couldn’t arise. If a machine carrying valuable pictures was brought down by any means the chances are that the pictures would perish with the aircraft.”

The Chief’s eyes were on Biggles’ face. “Are you telling me there’s nothing to stop a plane coming to this country by night, landing, and then leaving again?”

“That, sir, is exactly what I am saying. I could do it. Of course, such an operation would call for expert preparation and need a lot of money behind it.”

“But if the proceeds of a robbery made it worth while it could be done?”

“Without a doubt. With official connivance it would be simple.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The only risk such an aircraft would run would be on the ground here, and that need be no more than a matter of minutes. If arrangements were

officially made for the flight, from one of the Iron Curtain countries for instance, there would be no trouble in the country of departure. With an accomplice here at a prearranged spot to hand over the parcel the machine could fly straight home.”

“You think this is being done?”

“I’m saying it’s possible, sir. As a private enterprise it would be an expensive business.”

“Then who would spend money on such an operation for a few pictures?”

“Maybe a wealthy collector who would be content to keep them under lock and key and gloat over them in private. Or possibly an Iron Curtain country furnishing a new art gallery.”

“Why this emphasis on an Iron Curtain country?”

“I don’t necessarily mean Russia. What I really meant was a country, any country, where visitors are not welcome. In other words, a country where the pictures could be put on view with little chance of them being recognized as stolen property. I used the term Iron Curtain because with tourists flocking into every city outside it, were the pictures exposed to the public it could only be a question of time before they were spotted. I’m only pointing out the possibilities, sir. If these pictures are going abroad only a very rich man or a government could afford to finance their transportation by air by the method I described a moment ago.”

The Chief drew a deep breath. “Well, what can we do about it?”

“I can only say I’ll think about it, sir. So far it’s all been conjecture. We’ve nothing to work on.”

The Chief nodded. “I appreciate that. However, do the best you can.”

The Air Commodore spoke. “All right, Bigglesworth. That’s all for now. Keep me informed of any action you take. I’m sure the Chief will give us every possible assistance.”

“Yes, sir.” Biggles retired and returned to his own office where he found the others waiting with some anxiety.

“Well, what was it all about?” questioned Ginger.

Seated at his desk Biggles supplied the necessary information.

“So where do we start?” asked Bertie, polishing his eye-glass. “It seems we’re expected to work miracles.”

“I gave up relying on miracles long ago,” returned Biggles, lighting a cigarette. “For a start, pass me the morning papers and we’ll see exactly what we’re looking for. The last three pictures were pinched last night so

unless the thieves have moved fast they may still be in the country. I'd wager they won't be here long. Once they've left they'll be gone for good."

"Which means," said Ginger cynically, "we've got maybe twenty-four hours to find 'em."

"Probably less."

"Ha! What a hope." Ginger laid the papers on Biggles' desk.

* * *

There was silence while Biggles read newspaper accounts of the robbery. "This tells us a little," he said, looking up. "Of a number of pictures in the room only three, the most valuable, were taken. They were a self portrait of Rembrandt, a work called *The Boy in Black* by El Greco, and the third, *Donna Lucia*, by Frans Hals, presumably a painting of a lady. These were Old Masters. Modern art wasn't touched. Apparently it wasn't considered good enough."

"And what does that tell us?" asked Algy.

"The thief knew exactly what he was after. That in turn means he was an expert and that he knew the pictures were there. It was the same story in the previous art robberies. That isn't coincidence. These thefts are the work of one gang. If so, it suggests the pictures are all going to the same destination; in fact, to the same individual, who may be the master mind behind the racket. He finds out where the pictures are and sends experienced cracksmen to get them. Anyhow, that's how it looks to me. We may ask, how does he know where the pictures are? The obvious answer is that he goes to look at them. I shall assume he's a foreigner because the pictures would be useless in this country. No man here in his right mind would buy them knowing them to be stolen. He couldn't sell them. I doubt if the pictures *are* being sold. They're going into a collection somewhere—but I wouldn't try to guess where. Of course, this is really guesswork; but we've got to start somewhere. As I said a moment ago it's no use rushing off without an object."

"How do we set about establishing an object?" inquired Ginger. "It seems a pretty hopeless business to me."

"I haven't had much time to think but I can see two lines of approach, both vague I must admit. But if we don't do something the Big Chief will conclude we're a dead loss. If he's right in believing these pictures are being *flown* overseas—and there I agree with him—it's safe to assume that while they're still in this country, waiting for an aircraft to collect them, they'll be parked at the nearest available place to their final destination. What I mean

is, the pilot of the aircraft won't want to do more flying over this country than is absolutely necessary. That indicates a landing ground near the east coast."

"Why the east coast?"

"Because it's my guess that these pictures are going east. Put it like this. We can rule out north because one can't imagine them being taken to the North Pole. I eliminate the south coast because pictures are also being stolen from France. I can't see pictures being taken from here to a country where other pictures are being pinched. No. The pictures being stolen in France are leaving that country in the same way as they are leaving here. As for the west coast, it doesn't make sense because the cost of an aircraft capable of flying a load non-stop across the Atlantic would be greater than the value of the pictures. Moreover, such a machine would have to operate from an airport. It could hardly take on hundreds of gallons of fuel and oil without questions being asked. So my guess is east, in which case there would be no point in making the machine fly farther into this country than was necessary."

"There's a lot of east coast, old boy, if you're thinking of giving it the once over from topsides," murmured Bertie.

"We'll come to that presently," replied Biggles. "There's just a chance we may be able to reduce the area to be covered. That brings me to my second line of approach, which is at the London end. I'm still assuming that the man behind these thefts is a foreigner for the simple reason they'd be no earthly use to a local burglar. This man is a picture expert. He knows them by sight and exactly where they are, the room and how they are hung. How does he know? By going to look at them. In short, before the pictures were stolen the thief, or the brain behind the actual burglars, went to the gallery to get the layout. That's my guess and I shall work on it." Biggles paused.

"This, Algy, is where you start," he resumed. "I want you to go to the Bond Street art gallery from where the pictures were lifted last night and have a word with the owner, or manager. Find out how long the missing pictures had been on public view. Ask him if he sent out invitations for the exhibition and note the names of any foreign art dealers or collectors. He may keep a visitors' book. Some do. Again, check it for foreign names, and, if possible, the addresses. Ask, are any of these people permanently resident in this country? If not, where do they usually stay when they're here? Query anything else that may occur to you. That's enough for now. Get on with it. You can take Bertie with you for company. If the pictures haven't already left the country they won't be here much longer so we've no time to lose."

When Algy and Bertie had gone Ginger questioned: "What can I do?"

"You can come with me and use your eyes. While there's daylight left we'll take the Auster out and have a good look along the east coast for possible landing grounds not on the map. There are plenty in East Anglia. I'm not seriously hoping to see a stray aircraft but we can at least refresh our memories—and one never knows. We shan't learn anything sitting here. From the air there's just a chance we may see something that hooks up with what Algy learns in Bond Street. But we've done enough guessing. Let's go."

Half an hour later the police Auster was in the air, heading east.

Said Ginger, as his eyes roved the Essex marshes with their tidal inlets: "There's an angle of this picture racket that hasn't been mentioned. Insurance. Could that be behind it? Could the crooks be waiting for the usual reward to be offered for information leading to their recovery?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because in not one of the previous cases has the reward—one of twenty thousand pounds—been claimed; and that's real money. That's the chief reason why I feel sure the thefts are not being made for monetary gain. The pictures are not being sold. Some art enthusiast, a rich collector, is keeping them. He's the man behind it all. I imagine he lives abroad. If I'm right, once these pictures leave the country they'll disappear as completely as if they'd been dropped down an abandoned mine shaft."

The Auster, with the sea in sight, had turned north, following the coast.

After a while Ginger said: "There's enough flat open country here for a squadron of machines to get down."

"More than a flat patch is required by our particular bird. There must be a road for a car to bring the pictures to the rendezvous. Even cut out of their frames and rolled they'd make a bulky parcel and weigh quite a bit. The landing ground must be well away from houses, even the odd farm, or someone might spot what was going on. We needn't consider anything else so that narrows our search."

The Auster cruised on up the Suffolk coast, always in sight of the sea. As Ginger remarked, between the coastal towns there were plenty of lonely stretches, particularly along and behind the foreshore where the ground was not cultivated, although pools of water and beds of reeds suggested most of this was marsh or swamp. There were occasional inlets, too, running inland from the sea, although it could be supposed that some of these would disappear at low tide. Most of the beaches were shingle, but there were

stretches of sand on which, if the wind was right, a light plane could be put down.

Noticing that Ginger was staring down at something on his side Biggles asked: "What are you looking at?"

"I'm not sure. That creek just ahead of us—the one with the biggish house on the rising ground at the inner end. I was wondering what those white things on it could be. They're not birds. Quite a lot have drifted against the rushes all along the near side."

Biggles turned the machine to get a view. "Looks like paper, as if some litter-bugs have been having a picnic. Or it may be rubbish from the hamlet you can see a mile or so beyond the house. There may be a mill there which gets rid of its waste by dumping it into the brook that runs into the creek. I can see a small boat moored against a bit of a wharf near the big house. Probably use it for fishing. Wait a minute, though. This reminds me vaguely of something I've seen before somewhere. I'll think of it in a minute. What's the name of the village?"

Ginger consulted the map. "Frantham."

"Never heard of it."

The Auster cruised on as far as The Wash, and after glancing at his watch Biggles remarked: "We'd better be getting back. We haven't learned much we didn't know. There are plenty of places where a light plane could get down, certainly if the pilot knew his ground."

The Auster returned to its base. Biggles and Ginger went back to the office to find Algy and Bertie waiting for them. "Well, how did you get on?" asked Biggles.

"Nothing to get excited about," answered Algy. "The manager gave us the information you wanted. You were right about the invitations. A lot were sent out, some abroad, for the exhibition which opened last week. Everyone had to sign the visitors' book. We took note of the foreigners and their addresses."

"Were any of them resident near the east coast?"

"One, I think." Algy opened his notebook and ran down the names. "Here we are. Baron Wolfner. He's a celebrated Hungarian art critic. He always turns up at the big picture sales and exhibitions. He has a place in Suffolk called Frantham Old Hall."

Biggles frowned. "That's an odd coincidence—or is it? We had a second look at Frantham not two hours ago." With a strange expression on his face he stared at Ginger. "The big house by the creek. That might well be the Hall. I told you that white stuff on the water reminded me of something.

Now I've got it. It was a long time ago in the Lake District. They used the lakes for training seaplane pilots. I needn't tell you it isn't easy, in landing a marine aircraft, to judge the surface of dead calm water; so to make it easier for beginners it was the practice to strew sheets of newspaper on it."

"Well?"

"Those white things we saw were square. It could have been newspaper. There was plenty of it, more than could have got there by accident. I wonder . . . have I been looking up the wrong tree? Naturally, I was thinking only of a landplane; but there's no reason why the intruder, if there is one, shouldn't use a marine job. One would have no difficulty in getting down on that creek. It's a long shot, but I feel like having a closer look at that white stuff to confirm that it is paper, and if so find out how it got there. The place was too far off the beaten track for picnic parties."

"I didn't see a road," put in Ginger.

"If there's a house there must be a road of sorts leading to it." Biggles turned back to Algy. "Did you get any other particulars of this Baron what's-his-name?"

"Wolfner. None to speak of. He's well known in art circles. Goes abroad for the winter. Comes back for the big summer sales. Runs a Rolls, so obviously he's not short of cash."

"Owning a Rolls doesn't necessarily mean a man is all he should be. This Baron chap may not be the fellow we're looking for but I've got a strong hunch that someone is using that creek, and from the markers put out I can think of no other reason than aviation. A boat wouldn't need them. The fact that a picture expert lives practically on the bank may be coincidence. That's something I'm going to settle right away. I wouldn't exactly call it a clue, but it gives us a line, and we've nothing else to work on. The big question is, was that paper thrown on the water for last night—or tonight?"

Bertie spoke. "I'd say tonight. It can't have been there long or it would have got waterlogged and either sunk or broken up."

"That makes sense. Bring the car round, Ginger, while I'm having a look at the big scale map; and I shall have to tell the Air Commodore what we're going to do in case he calls."

"You won't fly up?"

"Not likely. Nothing would happen on that creek if an aircraft was already there. It's in full view of the house. We go by road. We should be there by night-fall. Get cracking."

It was nine o'clock when the police car stopped as close to the creek as it could get without using the drive that gave access to the Old Hall, which stood nearly a mile from the village of Frantham. The secondary road the car had taken had followed the hard ground well inside the foreshore, which here was a broad expanse of rough, uncultivated ground that ended at a narrow beach fringing the sea.

It was nearly dark, but the weather was fair, with no wind, and a moon nearly full provided conditions that were near perfect for night flying. There was no traffic on the road. The only light that showed was from a front window of the Hall. The only sound that broke a melancholy silence was the occasional cry of a bird.

"Now listen, everyone," ordered Biggles. "This is the drill. We march on that light, the idea being to get as near as possible to the landing stage where the boat is moored. If I've guessed right, that boat, or the wharf, should come into the picture. When we get there all we can do is park ourselves close by and wait. No talking."

They set off over what turned out to be marshy ground with frequent puddles. Except for the whirr of wings of a startled bird nothing happened, and in due course the surface of the creek lay as placid as a sheet of ice in front of them. The moon shining on the water made it impossible to see any floating paper, if there was any; but Biggles squelched through mud and water up to the knees to the limit of the reeds, stooped, and returned with a handful of dripping material. "Newspaper," he breathed. "Let's see what paper it is. That may give us an idea of where it came from. Make a tent of your jackets to shield the light while I have a look."

This was done. Biggles, torch in hand, crept under the coats. "Okay," he said, emerging. "That's all I wanted to know. It's a foreign paper; or rather, a magazine. Glossy, high-class stuff, that would more easily remain afloat than newsprint. I can't read it but there are pictures of antiques. That didn't come from the village. I'd bet it came from the Hall. Let's go on."

Moving slowly, stopping sometimes to listen, they followed the edge of the creek, waded the brook that ran in from the village and reached the side on which the big house stood. It was now fairly close, but no sound came from it. The single light still showed from a window facing the creek. Continuing, they came to a rough staging against which the boat was moored. It was a dinghy. The oars were in the rowlocks as if ready for use. A little farther on a clump of osiers mingled with tall rushes. "This should suit us fine," decided Biggles softly. "If we sit here we can't be seen. The question is now, does the boat go out to the plane, if one comes, or does the plane come right in? We can only wait and see."

They squatted, and a damp, uncomfortable vigil began.

Time dawdled on. Nothing happened. Not a ripple ruffled the surface of the water beside them. The reflection of the moon moved slowly across it. Midges were out in force, and for obvious reasons there could be no smoking to keep them at a distance. Nobody spoke.

It was a little after one o'clock when a sound, the first they had heard, broke the sullen silence. It was the purr of a car and came from the direction of the drive beyond the house. It stopped. A car door was slammed. This was followed by voices as if a visitor was being greeted.

"That's better," murmured Biggles.

"Who would come at this time o' night?" whispered Ginger.

"Somebody bringing the pictures—I hope."

Another weary hour passed before the next development. It looked as if all the lights of the house had been switched on. Their reflections fell far across the creek, making a landmark, as Biggles observed, that could be seen from fifty miles away.

Nerves became taut as voices approached. Two figures appeared silhouetted against the artificial light, one tall and slim, the other short and stout. The thin man carried on his shoulder a burden that might have been a small roll of linoleum. Both stopped by the wharf, talking casually and confidently but in a language none of the watchers understood.

Cupping his hands round his lips Biggles breathed: "I shan't wait for the plane. Algy, come with me. Bertie, Ginger, use your initiative according to what happens." He rose up and strode to the wharf. "We're police officers," he announced loudly. "I must ask you to show me the contents of that parcel."

There were a few seconds of silence as if the men had been stunned by shock. Then things happened swiftly. The man with the parcel dropped it, spun round and ran. Biggles dashed after him. The man turned. A gun cracked, streaming sparks over Biggles' shoulder. As the man turned to run again Biggles dived at his legs. They fell together, Biggles hanging on to the arm that held the gun. The scuffle did not last long. The man collapsed. Bertie, who apparently had struck him, dragged him clear. Breathing heavily Biggles picked himself up and recovered the gun the man had dropped.

"Put the bracelets on him," he snapped, and turned to Algy and Ginger who were holding the short man, now protesting volubly in broken English. Biggles cut him off with: "All right. That's enough. Are you Baron Wolfner?"

"Yes, and I'll——"

“That’s all I want to know.” Handcuffs clicked. “You’d better keep quiet. Shooting at a police officer in this country is a serious matter.”

The Baron, who it could now be seen was an old man, sank to the ground as if his legs had given way.

“Take care of him Algy, while I have a look at this,” ordered Biggles. With his penknife he started cutting the cords that secured the parcel.

“They’re only pictures,” protested the Baron.

“I want to see if they’re the ones I’m looking for.”

“I imagine so,” answered the Baron in a resigned voice. “You’ll find out, anyhow. Is that all you want to know?”

“No. What time is the plane due here?”

The Baron sighed. “So you know about that, too. It should be here any moment now.”

Biggles looked hard at the two prisoners. “If either of you tries to give a warning to the pilot it will make things worse for you,” he said sternly. “Take them out of the way, Algy.”

Silence fell. Biggles lit a cigarette.

They had not long to wait. From the direction of the sea came the faint whine of air passing over the plane surfaces of a gliding aircraft. A sudden splash, and a line of turbulent water rushed towards the landing stage. A small flying boat, airscrew idling, took shape. A touch of the throttle brought it in close. The airscrew died with a hiss. A man jumped ashore and, having made the machine fast, walked forward.

“Are you alone?” inquired Biggles.

“Yes. Always——” The man broke off as if suddenly suspicious.

“Keep coming,” ordered Biggles. “We’re police officers. We were waiting for you. Don’t try anything stupid.”

The pilot looked over his shoulder to see Ginger standing between him and the aircraft. He shrugged as Ginger advanced and took a gun from his pocket. Again handcuffs clicked.

Biggles turned, as a new voice spoke, to see three figures, two in uniform, coming up. “Want any help?” asked Inspector Gaskin. “I thought I heard a shot.”

Biggles stared. “What are you doing here?”

“The Air Commodore asked me to come along in case you ran into trouble.”

“That was a kind thought, but we’ve managed to get everything buttoned up, thanks.”

“Nothing I can do, then?”

“Yes, you can take these three prisoners off our hands. To get to our car we shall have to walk across the marsh, the way we came. I want to have a look at this aircraft, and immobilize it. Where’s your car?”

“On the drive.”

“Then you might have a look inside the house on the way to it. I don’t know who or what you may find there. I haven’t seen these yet, either.” Stooping, Biggles unrolled the parcel and turned a light on the first of three canvases to reveal a painting of a boy in a black velvet suit. He retied the parcel. “You might take these with you, too,” he requested.

“Ain’t you lucky,” growled Gaskin. “Fastest bit o’ work I ever heard of. You must have second sight—or something.”

Biggles smiled. “That’s right. But experience helped me to know, when I saw something, what I was looking at.”

“How?”

“Somebody left some newspaper scattered about where you’d never have seen it. It was as simple as that.”

“I don’t get it.”

Biggles grinned. “You’d have got your feet wet if you had. I’m going home to get my socks off. See you later.”

MYSTERY ON THE MOOR

FROM a comparatively low altitude of fifteen hundred feet Police Pilot "Ginger" Hebblethwaite, flying solo in a Service Auster, surveyed methodically in turn the cloudless sky above and around him, the sparkling waters of the English Channel on his left and the undulating panorama of the county of Devonshire on the right. The season was high summer. The time, five a.m.

He was on a regular dawn patrol, not looking for anything in particular but prepared to investigate, within the province of his duties, such matters as might call for explanation. That was his purpose for being in the air. He did not expect to see anything unusual; should he do so, that in itself would be unusual on what was a regular routine task with no particular objective—in the manner of an ordinary constable on his beat. But there was always the possibility, for, as his headquarters at Scotland Yard knew only too well, air transportation was being used more and more by the highly organized modern criminal in an effort to outwit the law.

So far he had seen nothing more exciting than a rubber raft adrift off Sidmouth, presumably having been lost by a careless bather. There was no one on it but he had signalled its position to base for the guidance of the local police.

He was content to be where he was, doing what he was. From horizon to horizon the heavens were clear eggshell blue; the atmosphere through which the Auster pushed its way, practically flying itself, was as soft as milk, and the countryside looked quiet and very beautiful under the rising sun. It was the sort of day when a pilot flying alone permits himself from time to time to hum a snatch of song. Ginger did just that.

Ahead of the Auster, moving slowly towards him, as it seemed, now lay the broad expanse of Dartmoor, the highest parts bristling with those granite teeth called tors, the lower parts dotted with small areas of woodland to form a pleasant contrast to the open moor. A tenuous mist, fast being devoured by the rising sun, still clung to occasional pools and bogs. This was the western extremity of his beat, so leaving the sea behind him he began a wide turn to the north before heading for home. This brought him over the practically uninhabited heart of the moor.

It may have been for this reason that his eyes came to rest on an isolated group of buildings sheltered on the north side by a straggling wood of what looked like ancient oaks. Thinking they made a useful landmark, and

wondering who would choose to live in such a remote spot, the tune he was humming died on his lips as his questing eyes picked up and focused on an object, or a part of one, that seemed singularly out of place. Half hidden by the trees stood an aircraft. He made it out to be an Auster like his own. He could not see anyone near it, but the branches of the trees and the shadows they cast prevented him from getting a clear view. For the same reason he was unable to make out the registration letters.

Without altering course he surveyed its immediate surroundings. Close to the trees was a house of fair size, long and low, with a yard and outbuildings. A red-painted tractor, a conspicuous spot of colour, stood on a plot of cultivated ground to suggest the place was a farm. A track wandered across the moor between the house and a distant road.

Ginger consulted the map that lay on his knees and looked again at the ground. The plane was still in the same place although he could see less of it, his own position having moved. A little puzzled, he flew on. What was the machine doing there? On the other hand, there was no reason why it shouldn't be there. A man living in such an out-of-the-way establishment was the very person to take advantage of private air transport, he pondered.

It was not until the farm was well behind his tail that the thought occurred to him that the pilot might be in trouble, resulting in a forced landing. If so he had probably gone to the house. If it was on the telephone all would be well; he would be able to 'phone for help. If not, he would have to go some distance to find one.

Deciding he had treated the matter too casually Ginger turned, and dropping off five hundred feet of height retraced his course. What he was looking at now was the ground, trying to establish the nature of it as a safe spot on which an aircraft might land. There was not a lot of room, for much of the surface was rough, but he formed the opinion that an experienced pilot should have no difficulty in putting down a light plane. He looked in vain for a marked runway. He could see no wheel tracks. There was no white circle, no windstocking, nothing to suggest the place was a regular landing ground. The only smoke to indicate the direction of the breeze was rising from the farm chimney. This supported the idea of a forced landing.

Ginger resolved to fly low enough to get the registration letters so that on arrival home he would be able to check the ownership of the machine. At least, that was his intention before he observed, with surprise, that the aircraft was no longer there. He couldn't see it anywhere. Had it taken off? He scanned the air expecting to see it airborne; but he failed to find it. What had become of it? Where could it have gone?

For the first time a little suspicious he pinpointed the spot on his map, shot a couple of oblique photographs with his pistol-grip camera and made the best of his way home.

* * *

He found Biggles alone in the Operations Room when, rather more than an hour later, he walked in with a still-damp photograph in his hand.

“Well?” queried Biggles casually without looking up. “See anything?”

“I saw an aircraft.”

“They’re getting quite common,” returned Biggles with gentle sarcasm.

“Not where I saw this one.”

“And where was that?” Biggles put down his pen.

“On Dartmoor,” answered Ginger, and went on to narrate the circumstances.

Biggles sat back, looking at him. “Seems a bit odd,” he admitted. “Pity you didn’t get the registration when you first spotted it.”

“I’ve told you why I couldn’t, and that may have been the reason why the machine was parked under the trees. The pilot may have dodged under them when he heard me coming.”

“Didn’t it occur to you to land to find out exactly what was going on?”

“Not immediately. There was no landing track and there seemed no point in risking cracking my undercart for no purpose. I’d no real excuse for interfering, anyway. When I got back the machine had gone. Someone must have moved it pretty smartly.”

“Where exactly is this place?”

“About ten miles south of Okehampton. The nearest main road I made out to be the A386 from Okehampton to Tavistock. That would be roughly five miles from the farm. This is the spot.” Ginger laid his photograph on Biggles’ blotter.

“Do you want me to follow it up?” he asked, as Biggles studied the picture.

“I was just wondering what you could do,” answered Biggles, reaching for a cigarette. “Is this place by any chance near the prison?”

“No, that’s miles away to the south. Should I have another look round tomorrow at the same time?”

“If you make a practice of flying low over the farm, and there should be anything improper going on, the people there will take fright and suspend

operations.”

“I might land and make direct inquiries at the house. Whatever is going on the people there must know about it.”

“In which case questions would get you nowhere. As things are, the farmer, or whoever lives there, will have no cause to worry merely because you flew over this morning.”

“Then how do we get the answer?”

“It might be better to tackle the job from ground level. Hikers on the moor are not uncommon.” Biggles had picked up his magnifying glass.

“What are you looking at?”

“Those two animals in the yard, near the big barn.”

“I made them out to be pigs—a dark-skinned breed.”

“Could be. They look to me more like dogs. Incidentally, that barn is big enough to house a small aircraft. From what you tell me it must have disappeared pretty quickly this morning as soon as you turned your tail to it.”

“I see what you mean. Like me to go down and have a look?”

“That would settle the matter one way or the other. If there’s nothing wrong the farmer’s wife should ask you in for a cup of tea. If she’s short with you—well, you’d better have a closer look. It’s a nice day for a stroll on the moor. Bertie should be in any moment now. Get him to run you down in his Jag. Park it handy and give your legs some exercise.”

“It’ll be late by the time we get there.”

“So much the better. After dark it’ll be easier to pretend you’ve lost your way. Take care you don’t. On Dartmoor that can be serious. Take a compass—and don’t forget those dogs. They might be vicious.”

“What exactly do you want me to do?”

“Not much for the time being. Ascertain if an aircraft is being kept at the farm and if so get its registration. That’ll tell us who it belongs to and so perhaps give us a line on what it’s doing there. That should be enough to go on with. I can’t recall an application from a private owner to operate from Dartmoor.”

“It might have been a member of a club making a call.”

“Possibly. After all, if a fellow holds a licence there’s nothing to prevent him landing on a friend’s property as long as it doesn’t interfere with other people—provided it hasn’t been overseas, in which case it must land at an authorized Customs aerodrome. At this juncture there’s no need to ask questions at the house unless it’s unavoidable.”

Ginger nodded. "We shan't be able to see much in the dark."

"Use your nose. If there's a plane anywhere near you should be able to smell it."

"Okay. It shouldn't take long to get this sorted out," concluded Ginger.

* * *

Half an hour later he and Sergeant-Pilot Bertie Lissie were on their way to Devon, the immediate objective being Highway A386, which a study of the map had confirmed was the nearest convenient point to the farm, on a main road, which they would be able to reach in the car. They had considered taking lodgings at Okehampton, but as this would mean a much longer walk to the farm, they decided against it unless events should make it necessary.

With a stop for lunch and a fill-up with oil and petrol it was a little after seven o'clock when they passed through Okehampton and presently took the left fork on to A386. The sun was getting low but they reckoned they still had about two hours of daylight left. Not that this was of vital importance as after dark they would have the assistance of a moon three-quarters full; or so they had reason to expect, although the weather had deteriorated somewhat, a slight swing of the wind to the north bringing in a lot of high cloud and putting a chill in the air. But so far there was no sign of rain.

"The way to the farm should be along here on the left," remarked Ginger. "It can't be far."

This soon proved to be correct, and Bertie brought the car to a stop a little beyond the entrance to a track—it could hardly be called a road—which meandered across an undulating vista of moorland, mostly open but broken here and there by a few stunted trees and outcrops of grey rock.

"You're sure this is the right one, dear boy?" queried Bertie.

"No, I'm not sure, but I think it must be," answered Ginger. "I saw only one track."

"Let's try it," said Bertie cheerfully, moving on to the verge. "The car should be all right here," he went on, passing out two haversacks and walking sticks before locking the doors. "How far did you say we shall have to pad the hoof?"

"About five miles. We ought to do it in an hour."

They set off at a brisk pace, the sooner to get the business finished. No precautions were taken against being seen, as they saw no reason for this

and would have found it difficult anyway. As far as they could see they had the moor to themselves. A pair of buzzards wheeled high overhead.

“A car must use this track quite often,” observed Bertie, his eyes on a tangle of tyre marks that furrowed the sandy surface.

“People living at the place I saw could hardly manage without a car, for shopping, and that sort of thing.”

“We could have brought mine across.”

“That wasn’t the idea. What excuse could we have made for going to the farm? We’re hikers who have lost our way—remember? That’s why, for the look of it, we’re carrying haversacks which I trust we shan’t need.”

They trudged on, Ginger from time to time casting an anxious eye on the sky. “This was supposed to be a fine weather job but I wouldn’t bet on it,” he remarked.

Half an hour later came the first spots of rain, presently to develop into what is known locally as a Dartmoor drizzle, which reduced visibility to something less than a hundred yards. However, the track remained plain to see and there was no talk of turning back. They were obviously going to get wet whatever they did. They merely increased their pace. They saw nobody, heard nothing. The terrain became more undulating but with wide flat areas between the rises and falls.

In due course they reached a point where, on level ground, the track ran adjacent to a stand of gnarled, wind-distorted oaks, which Ginger felt sure could only be those under which he had seen the aircraft on his dawn patrol. These were explored but nothing of interest found. Certainly there was no plane there now. By the time they had done this darkness was falling, largely as a result of the weather, and what had promised earlier to be a bright prospect had become such a damp, dismal business that Ginger was beginning to wish he hadn’t noticed the plane.

“We’ll have a look at the farm now we’re here,” he said quietly as they returned to the track. “If we encounter anyone we’ll ask for directions to the nearest main road.”

They went on in silence. A big barn loomed in the murk. Rounding the end of it they found themselves overlooking the yard. On the far side the lighted windows of the house glowed mistily. They stopped as sounds reached their ears: the voices of several men in the house talking loudly and cheerfully.

“Must be having a party,” conjectured Bertie.

“If there’s a plane here it can only be in the barn,” asserted Ginger. “Let’s have a look—if we can get in.”

They proceeded, cautiously now, to the wide double doors. Surprisingly, Ginger thought, they were not locked. He opened one and they stepped inside, his torch cutting a wedge of light that moved slowly round the interior. There was no aircraft. At first glance there was nothing there except some farm implements thrown down at one end.

Ginger sniffed. "I smell doped fabric," he breathed. "There has been a plane in here and not so long ago. Hello, what's this?" he went on. On the wall was a low shelf on which lay an assortment of tools, with them a small square of paper. He picked it up. It was a photograph, a rough print of a man standing beside an Auster aircraft. Before he could examine it closely, from outside, fast approaching, came a clamour of ferocious snarls and growls. Instinctively he switched off his torch and put the photo in his pocket as Bertie, just in time, pulled the door shut between them and the dogs which, frustrated, set up a furious barking.

"That's torn it," said Bertie lugubriously.

They had not long to wait for the next development. An authoritative voice could be heard approaching, calling off the dogs. Reaching the door it said: "Come on out."

"What about the dogs?" returned Ginger. The animals were still growling deep in their throats.

"They're all right."

Bertie and Ginger stepped out, dazzled by the beam of a torch in their eyes which prevented them from seeing the man behind it.

"What's the game?" inquired the voice curtly.

"We were looking for shelter," explained Bertie meekly. "The barn seemed just the job. Hope you don't mind."

The light was switched off as the man who held it was joined by three others advancing from the house, apparently curious to know what was going on. Their faces appeared curiously white until it could be observed that they were more or less covered by bandages.

"If we can't stay here perhaps you'd be kind enough to direct us to the nearest main road," said Ginger.

"Which way did you come?"

"We were on the moor when the rain started. Coming to a track we followed it."

There was a pause during which the speaker stepped away a short distance to hold a brief conversation, in a low voice, with his companions. He came back. "Why aren't you more careful?" he complained. "People like

you are a nuisance. Well, you can't stay here. Follow back the track you came on and it'll take you to the road."

"Thanks," acknowledged Bertie. As an afterthought he added: "It'll be as black as pitch presently. I wonder if you have an old torch you could sell us, or lend us?"

The man hesitated. "All right. You can have this one. Don't come back or I won't be responsible for the dogs."

"Thanks again," murmured Bertie, taking the torch. "We'll be on our way."

That was all. Nothing more was said. In a minute Bertie and Ginger were on their way back to the car. For some time neither spoke. Then, well clear of the farm, Ginger said: "What do you make of that? It strikes me there's something queer about it. Why do they need guard dogs? Why were they so anxious to get us off the premises when any decent farmer would have let us stay? And what were those chaps doing with bandages on their faces?"

"One had his hands bandaged, too," returned Bertie. "What did you pick up off that shelf?"

"A snapshot of a man standing by an Auster. That should tell us something, if not all we want to know. What was the idea of asking for a torch when we had one?"

"Thinking on the same lines as you, old boy, I thought that chap's fingerprints might be instructive. One way and another we haven't done so badly."

They strode on and without difficulty reached the car.

Said Bertie: "Do we sleep somewhere on the way or do we push right on for home?"

"I'm all for sleeping in my own bed," decided Ginger. "Let's press on. There shouldn't be much traffic on the road at this hour so we should be home in time to snatch a few hours' sleep. We needn't wake Biggles. We'll leave the photo and the torch on the table with a note giving him the gen so that it won't be necessary for him to wake us too early."

This worked out as planned.

* * *

When Ginger and Bertie got out of bed at ten o'clock the next morning, not surprisingly having overslept, it was to find that Biggles had gone early

to the office at Scotland Yard taking the “exhibits” with him. There, an hour later, they joined him.

“Why didn’t you wake us?” protested Ginger.

Biggles smiled. “No hurry. You gave me plenty to go on with. I’ve been busy—but I’ll tell you about that presently. First, what happened on Dartmoor?”

Ginger and Bertie told the story between them. “Have you made anything of it?” asked Ginger at the finish.

“Quite a lot. I was only waiting for your report before going to the Air Commodore for instructions.”

“Then there is something crooked going on!”

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say that, but I now know enough to arouse my curiosity. This is it. Your photo enabled me to check on the aircraft, assuming it was the one you saw. It’s privately owned by a Doctor Alton Bentworth who lives in London, is a member of the Longborne Flying Club and keeps his machine there. From the secretary I’ve learned that Bentworth does a fair amount of flying, mostly very early morning. He did that yesterday, apparently going to Dartmoor. He got back about eleven, so it seems the machine must still have been there, although you didn’t see it, the second time you flew over. It may have been moved into the barn. At some time or other the doctor must have given his friends there this snapshot of himself—a touch of vanity perhaps. He specializes in plastic surgery, which hooks up with what you now tell me about men in bandages.”

“You think he might be running a private clinic or convalescent home for his patients?”

“A natural supposition, but if that is so, although he may not know it he has at least one queer member on his staff. The Fingerprint Department tell me that this torch has been handled by a gentleman named Manton Rushling, once a solicitor, who recently did five years for forgery. He was discharged from prison last year. He is now a free man, but the questions we must ask ourselves are, what is his association with the doctor and what are they both doing at a lonely farm on Dartmoor?”

Bertie answered. “From the gents we saw in bandages I’d say there’s a spot of plastic surgery going on.”

“That’s what it looks like. If that’s correct, who are these men being operated on?”

“How do we find that out?”

“That,” replied Biggles getting up, “is what I am now going to ask the Chief. It may mean a search warrant, and it’s for him to decide if we’re justified in applying for one.” He went out.

He was away for some time, and when he returned it was with Inspector Gaskin of the Criminal Investigation Department. “We’ve moved a step farther,” he told the others. “Gaskin tells me that two years ago Doctor Bentworth was struck off the Medical Register for improper practices; which means that officially he can’t practise his profession. That being so he can’t legally be running a nursing home on Dartmoor—with an ex-criminal solicitor in charge.”

“Then what can he be doing?” asked Ginger.

“That’s what we are going to find out. The quickest way will be to go to Dartmoor, ask some questions and have a look round. Gaskin may recognize someone. He has a search warrant should it be necessary. The ideal thing would be to arrive when the doctor is there. It’s too late for that today so we’ll slip down early tomorrow morning, that apparently being the usual time he makes his visit. We might as well fly down. If one Auster can land so can another. We’ll leave it like that.”

* * *

Shortly after daylight the next morning the police Auster was cruising high in the air within sight of the club airfield at Longborne. As this called for only a slight detour from the direct course for Dartmoor Biggles had decided to look at it on the way. It had proved worth while, for a hangar door could be seen open, and on the tarmac, airscrew spinning, an Auster.

“There he goes,” said Ginger, as the machine left the ground.

“Capital. We’ll go with him,” answered Biggles. “I’ll watch where he lands and follow him in.”

“If he spots you trailing him he may not land,” said Gaskin.

“With the glare of the sun in his eyes if he looks back he won’t see anything.”

Nothing more was said. It was soon clear that the leading Auster was on a direct course for Dartmoor. Biggles kept well behind; with the visibility near perfect there was no risk of him losing his quarry.

Rather more than half an hour later, with the wide expanse of Dartmoor in sight, it began to lose height and, as had been anticipated, it eventually glided down to the farm, landed near it and ran on under the trees where Ginger had originally seen it. This was all Biggles wanted to know. He

landed along the same track, and apparently was not seen, because he had not been heard, until the doctor cut his engine. When the police party got out and walked forward it was to find the pilot they had followed staring at them in obvious astonishment, as was understandable. He was a pale-faced, slightly-built man in the early thirties.

Gaskin opened the conversation. "We're police officers," he announced bluntly. "Are you Doctor Alton Bentworth?"

"Er—yes." The doctor's face went a shade paler.

"I'm going to ask you some questions," went on the Inspector. "You're not compelled to answer them but it will save time and trouble all round if you do. What are you doing here?"

"I've come to call on friends. Any reason why I shouldn't?"

Gaskin ignored the question. "Who are these friends? You might as well tell me because I shall find out. I know one of them already. His name's Rushling. Do you know who and what he is?"

The doctor hesitated, biting his lip. "More or less," he admitted.

"How many men are there here besides him?"

"Three."

"What are their names?"

"Leston, Gunther and Gallinsky."

A slow smile of satisfaction spread over the Inspector's face. "Good. I've been looking for them for some time." To Biggles, in an aside, he murmured: "These are the wide boys who pulled off a twenty-thousand pay snatch a couple of months ago." Turning back to the doctor and raising his voice he questioned: "Did you know that?"

No answer.

Biggles stepped in. "The game's up, Bentworth, so you might as well talk. Who arranged this party?"

"Rushling. We were at school together. He knew I'd been in trouble and came to see me with a proposition. I had to make a living somehow."

"And the proposition was that he should run an establishment where crooks could lie low and at the same time have their faces altered so they would not be recognized by the police. Right?"

The doctor's face was now ashen. "How did you know?" he managed to get out.

"I guessed. What about the bandaged hands? Are you faking new fingerprints for them, too?"

“For those who want it done.”

Biggles shook his head. “Pity you couldn’t have put your ability to better use. How long has this been going on?”

“About six months. These are my first patients here.”

“I imagine others would have followed.”

“Probably.”

“What was the idea of flying to and fro?”

“The sort of operations I do take time. I had to make daily visits. By plane I could do the trip in half an hour whereas by road it would take several hours.”

Gaskin came back. “These three crooks. The money hasn’t been recovered. Have they got it here? Having admitted so much you might as well finish.”

“I don’t know. Why should they tell me?”

“You’re not doing this for nothing. Where do you suppose they got the money from to pay you? You knew it had been stolen. I’d bet they paid in cash.”

“Quite true.”

“We’ll have a look at these notes presently,” asserted Gaskin. “The numbers are known. Now I’ll have a word with your precious patients. Are they likely to cut up rough?”

The doctor smiled wryly. “As they’re in the middle of facial operations they’re in no condition for that. For the same reason they’re not likely to run away. You’ll have to leave them here for the time being. In their present state it might be dangerous to move them. Now I’ve started I shall have to complete the job.”

“Let’s see what they have to say about it,” growled Gaskin, walking towards the house.

* * *

There is no need to go into the details of what followed. Never were criminals found in a more helpless state. The stolen notes were found in the house so the law took its usual course. Dr. Bentworth, bitter at having been drawn into the unsavoury business, turned Queen’s Evidence. All the culprits went to prison for conspiracy, the three wage bandits getting the longer sentences for robbery with violence.

As Inspector Gaskin said seriously in Biggles' office when it was all over: "This face alteration by plastic surgery is a new menace. It was a clever idea and might well have come off if you hadn't nipped it in the bud. Think what it could have meant! With professional crooks wearing new faces, and thumbs, the records on which we rely for identification could have become a dead loss."

Biggles grinned. "Someone has to keep pace with the times. The case should convince the Chief Commissioner that the Air Police are worth their petrol."

THE TWO BRIGHT BOYS

NOT all the time of the Air Police was spent in the pursuit of criminals. There was much routine work to be done; for example, keeping a check on privately owned aircraft to ensure that they were not used for improper purposes and watching that such machines returning from the Continent landed at an official Customs airport. This was all part and parcel of the day's work with seldom anything to show for it. There were also complaints, as of low flying, to be investigated. These were usually settled without any fuss, but there was one case that was not without a humorous aspect, although, to be sure, as so often happens, comedy was walking uncomfortably close to tragedy.

The affair began with a complaint from a small air line operating company working between the North of England and London. One of their pilots had reported that over a certain area of Hertfordshire he had been "buzzed" by a small aircraft of unknown type. This confirmed the statement of another pilot who had noted on his Flight Report that, near the same place, he had seen a very small, red, high-wing monoplane of the "pusher" type behaving in a suspicious manner. He described the plane as "a horror on wings".

These reports, following closely on a protest about dangerous flying from the parson of a Hertfordshire village, who stated that a small red aeroplane had missed hitting his church spire by inches, resulted in Biggles being sent along to investigate. He kept an open mind about what he was likely to find.

In an Air Police Auster he flew over the area several times without seeing the culprit. Algy and Bertie took turns, and they saw nothing, either.

Biggles was puzzled. "There must be something there," he declared. "Two pilots and a parson can hardly be suffering from the same hallucination."

The search continued, and at last, early one fine morning, Ginger, watching the sky while Biggles circled, spotted what they were looking for.

"For Pete's sake!" he exclaimed. "Look what's coming."

Biggles started, staring through the windscreen. "What the devil. . . !"

The aircraft, a tiny red-painted high-wing monoplane, with a propeller behind and an undercarriage that looked like a perambulator, was cutting straight across their course.

“Watch out!” cried Ginger. “He hasn’t seen us.”

Biggles must have realized it, for he swung up in a steep climbing turn. As the stranger passed below them Ginger saw a small hatless head, in an open cockpit, looking down over the side. “He still hasn’t seen us,” he muttered. “That fellow’s a menace. He must think he owns the sky.”

By this time Biggles had come round and was following the red monoplane, now going down. “We’ll soon know all about that little horror,” he remarked, in a hard voice, as the objective machine flattened out over a wide, flat expanse of what looked like marshy land. Not far away, on some rising ground, stood a country mansion, and this, with some clumps of fine timber, suggested that the landing ground was in a park of some size.

The red machine ran to a stop in front of a large wooden barn with a corrugated iron roof, clearly of recent construction. Biggles ran the Auster beside it and jumped down to find himself being regarded askance by its pilot, who had now been joined by a companion. Both were boys of about sixteen.

“Hello!” called one, pointing to the red machine. “Isn’t she a beauty? Did you see her in the air?”

Ginger smiled when he saw painted on the side of the little monoplane, in white, racy lettering, its name. *Skylark*.

Biggles was not smiling. “Yes, we saw it,” he said, answering the boy’s question. “Did you see us?”

“No.”

“That’s what I thought. Lucky for all of us I saw you. What do you boys think you’re doing?”

“We’re designing an air flivver,” was the enthusiastic reply.

“What’s your name?”

“Tony Hankin. This is my friend, Cliff Clemson.”

“And you’re responsible for this?” Biggles indicated the little monoplane.

“Yes, we did it ourselves,” said the boy, proudly. “You see, we reckon it’s about time a plane at a price within reach of everyone was put on the market. That’s why we call our machine a flivver. That’s what Henry Ford, the man who made motoring for the million, called his first car. It was the price that made motoring popular.”

“And what he did with the motor car you’re going to do with the aeroplane, eh?”

“Exactly.”

Biggles smiled sadly. “Did no one ever tell you that Mr. Ford also made an *air flivver* for the million, and why you don’t see it flying?”

“No.”

“Well, he did. And he threw a big party to introduce it to the public. He also engaged a leading test pilot to demonstrate it. The plane took off and was never seen again. It must have fallen in the sea. Whereupon Mr. Ford, realizing that if an expert pilot could lose his life in his *air flivver* he was likely to be responsible for thousands of deaths, ordered his men to smash every *flivver* that had been built. And that was that.”

“The machine must have been structurally unsound,” declared Tony. “There’s nothing wrong with ours. We’re still alive, aren’t we?”

“For the moment, yes.”

“If you’re going to be so depressing I shall wish you hadn’t dropped in on us. Why did you?”

“Because I’ve been looking for you. There have been complaints about your flying.”

“By a lot of interfering old spoil-sports, I’ll bet.”

“The pilot of a plane with a load of passengers on board has reason to complain when he’s buzzed by a contraption that might fall to pieces at any moment.”

“I didn’t buzz him,” denied Tony hotly. “He altered course to look at me.”

Biggles failed to repress a smile. “I can believe that. But he says he was getting out of your way, he didn’t know where you were going, and he didn’t think you did, either. You didn’t see me this morning. If I hadn’t seen you and got out of your way you were likely to have rammed me. You were looking at the ground.”

“Don’t you ever look at the ground to get your bearings?”

“Yes, but I also watch where I’m going.” Biggles indicated the barn, the interior of which had been well fitted out as a workshop. “Where did you get the money for all this?”

“My mother let me have it.”

“What does your father think about it?”

“I haven’t got a father. Neither has Cliff. They were both killed flying in the war. I shall have plenty of money when I’m twenty-one, anyway.”

Biggles glanced at the big house on the hill. “Is that where you live?”

“Yes. This is our land. We can do what we like on our own property, can’t we?”

“Provided you don’t endanger the lives of other people, and that’s what you are doing. Tell me, does your mother approve this dangerous game you’re playing?”

Tony hesitated. “Well, not entirely. But she knows that Cliff and I are going into aviation when we leave school and she’s too good a sport to stand in our way. That’s why we wouldn’t do anything foolish.”

Ginger turned away to hide a smile.

“How old are you?” was Biggles’ next question.

“We’re both sixteen.”

“Don’t you think you’re starting a bit early?”

“No. We’ve been a year working on this job, in the hols. Working jolly hard, too.”

“I can believe that,” said Biggles. “What’s the engine?”

“Actually, it’s only an outboard motor which we’ve adapted for the time being. I’ll admit it gets a bit warm. And, of course, it doesn’t give us as much power as we’d like. But then, it hasn’t much weight to lift.”

“What’s your top speed?”

“I’d say about forty-five.”

“What’s going to happen if you run into a wind of fifty miles an hour?”

Tony thought for a moment. “In that case I suppose I shall have to go backwards.”

“Won’t that make it difficult to see where you’re going?”

“I’m glad you raised that point,” acknowledged Tony. “I’ll fit a reflector. That should answer that question. As for the *Skylark* falling to pieces, that’s nonsense. The airframe is welded tubular steel construction and we’ve allowed an ample margin of safety. Anyhow, as you’ve seen for yourself, she flies like a bird, and that’s all we ask. We aren’t out for breaking records.”

Biggles shook his head slowly. “What you’re going to break is your neck.”

“And if I do, what of it? It’s my neck, isn’t it?”

Biggles smiled faintly. “I’m sorry, Tony. I think you’ve done a wonderful job and I give you full marks for it. But I’m an air police officer and I can’t let you go on with this. Already there have been complaints. If you don’t kill yourselves, presently you’re going to kill someone else.”

“Coming from you, a pilot, I call that a pretty poor argument,” said Tony, bitterly. “You can’t stop us flying.”

“Have you got a Certificate of Airworthiness?”

“We haven’t applied for one yet. We’re still in the experimental stage. We still have a few teething troubles to get over.”

“After all,” put in Cliff, “the Wright Brothers didn’t have a C. of A., and if they hadn’t gone ahead with their idea there still wouldn’t be any flying. Our plan is to have a machine all ready to go into production the day we leave school. We shall form a company and let some of the other chaps at school in on it.”

“Who taught you to fly?” inquired Biggles, curiously.

Tony answered. “Nobody. We taught ourselves, as the pioneers did in the old days before there were such things as instructors. At first we just taxied about to get the feel of the controls. Then one day I took off by accident and had to do a circuit to land. I must admit I was in a bit of a flap for a few minutes, but once I found she handled all right I was okay. Now we take it in turns to fly. We shall sell thousands of these machines. Every chap with a motor bike will want one. That should at least take some of the traffic off the roads.”

“By putting it into the air you’re going to make life a more dangerous business than it is already,” predicted Biggles. “By-the-way, I notice that you haven’t bothered with such details as instruments.”

“We don’t need them,” asserted Tony airily. “I can judge my speed and height.”

“What if your engine fails?”

“I shall just come down. With a landing speed of thirty miles an hour I could get down in any field.”

“And if there wasn’t a field?”

“I’d get down somewhere.”

“On someone’s house, perhaps.”

“I keep away from houses.”

“You nearly hit the church steeple.”

“A bit of a haze blew up after I’d taken off. I saw the church in time, anyway. A miss is as good as a mile.”

“The people underneath you might not agree,” countered Biggles. “But never mind that. I’d hate to discourage anyone from flying but I have other people to think about and I can’t let you continue with these experiments. I’ll tell you a better idea. Instead of learning by trial and error, as you are now, which wastes time, why not wait till you leave school and then take a

course of aircraft engineering. Then, by the time you inherit your father's money you'll be qualified to start business seriously."

"But we want to fly *now*. There's nothing wrong with our machine. Get in and try her yourself."

Biggles recoiled. "No thank you."

"Don't say you're scared!"

"I certainly am. And if you knew as much about flying as I do so would you be. Oh yes, I know she'll get around while everything's going fine, but what's going to happen when something goes wrong?"

"Why should anything go wrong?"

"Nobody knows, but it's something that happens to every pilot sooner or later," answered Biggles, trying to keep a straight face. "And when it does, you mark my words, you'll wish you'd kept your feet where they really belong, on the ground. Any pilot will tell you that. And the longer he's been flying the more he realizes it."

Tony made a gesture of disdain. "Not me. Risk is all part of the game."

Biggles spoke earnestly. "Listen here, Tony. Don't fool yourself. This isn't a game you're playing. One day, and it may be any day, you'll remember my words when you see an ugly old man with a grey beard sitting in the cockpit beside you. You can laugh now, but you won't laugh then. Besides, you have your mother to consider."

"She doesn't mind what I do."

"She will the day you fly into something solid. She'll reproach herself for the rest of her life. On the ground you can make mistakes and get away with it, but in the air, unless you're lucky, you only make one."

"You are a cheerful Jonah, I must say."

"I'm not going to argue with you any longer," said Biggles firmly. "I'll go and discuss this matter with my chief and let you know his decision. Meanwhile, you can taxi to your heart's content, but don't you leave the ground. That way you shouldn't hurt anyone except yourself. Unless you promise to do that I shall immobilize this aircraft here and now."

"All right," agreed Tony, reluctantly. "But don't be long. We're all set to do an altitude test."

Biggles glanced at the sky. "With thunder about that can well be left to another day." He took out his notebook. "What's your mother's name and address?"

"Lady Hankin, Betcham Manor."

"And yours?"

“Lord Antony Hankin—same address.”

Biggles’ lip twitched. “Very well, your lordship. Be careful what you get up to until I come back.”

As they turned away and walked over to the Auster Ginger nearly exploded with the mirth he had with difficulty suppressed.

“It has its funny side,” conceded Biggles, smiling. “But it isn’t funny, really. They’re two nice kids, and keen, and they’re probably calling me a wet blanket. I should be very sorry to see them hurt themselves, but that’s what’s going to happen if they go on, as certain as night follows day. Their mothers must be out of their minds to let them do it—but then, some mothers are like that.”

Back at Scotland Yard Biggles explained the situation to Air Commodore Raymond.

“They’ll have to be stopped,” decided the Air Commodore. “They’re a danger to themselves and everyone else. If they care to clip their wings they can trundle about on the ground as much as they like. I’d rather not make a court order to stop them if it can be avoided. I’ll speak to Lady Hankin on the phone about it. Wait a minute.”

He put through a call to Betcham Manor and had a long talk with Tony’s mother. When he hung up he looked at Biggles sadly. “She says she’s terrified, but she can’t stop them. Tony’s mad about flying. She talked a lot of nonsense about him being a problem child.”

“The boy looked normal enough to me,” stated Biggles. “The fact is, I imagine, he’s always been allowed to have anything he wants.”

“Well, he can’t have an aeroplane,” said the Air Commodore, definitely. “He’s too young. If he won’t promise to stay on the ground we shall have to take that dangerous toy away from him. Go and tell him so. Make him see that we’re thinking of his own good, and his mother.”

“I’ll try, but it may not be easy,” promised Biggles.

With Ginger in the Auster he flew back to Betcham Manor through weather that was fast deteriorating, necessitating detours to avoid thunderstorms.

“Good thing you told those kids to stay on the carpet,” remarked Ginger, as they flew low through a heavy shower of rain and hail.

Having landed, they found Cliff sitting on a chock just inside the barn looking a picture of dejection. The *Skylark* was not to be seen.

“Where’s Tony?” asked Biggles, curtly.

“I wish I knew,” was the disconsolate reply.

“Do you mean he’s in the air?”

“Yes—or he was. He can’t be, now.”

“What do you mean?”

“He took off over an hour ago and the *Skylark* has only an endurance of half an hour. We fitted only a small tank to keep the weight down. I’m afraid something must have happened to him.”

Biggles turned to Ginger. “Come on. We’d better start looking for him.”

Just as they reached the Auster a yell from Cliff brought them both round. He was pointing. “Here he comes,” he shouted, joyfully.

Ginger looked in the direction indicated. Trudging wearily across the marsh through a drizzle of rain was a limping, bedraggled figure which, in spite of a bloodstained handkerchief tied round its forehead, he recognized as the missing airman.

Biggles returned to the barn. “I thought I told you not to leave the ground,” he said sternly, as Tony limped in and sank down on an oil drum.

“I’d no intention of doing so,” stated Tony miserably, removing the soaking handkerchief to reveal a nasty cut on his forehead. “It was an accident,” he went on. “I’ll admit I was taxi-ing rather fast to get in before the storm broke. A sudden gust of wind lifted me and then I had to go on or I’d have crashed into the hangar. Before I could get round the rain came down and I couldn’t see a thing.”

“Nasty feeling, isn’t it?”

“Frightful. When hail started hammering me on the head I was as blind as a bat. I’d no idea of where I was. Every second I expected to hit a tree or a house or something. Every time I tried to get down I saw things whizzing past me. I remembered what you said about Death riding in the cockpit and I’d have given anything just to *see* the ground. I nearly landed in a lake. Another time I missed a top-decker bus on a road. If the driver hadn’t swerved I’d have hit him. It was like a nightmare. When my engine packed up I thought I’d had it. I think my heart stopped as well. I finished up in a pasture—I don’t know where. I should have been all right, even though I bounced a bit, if there hadn’t been a barbed-wire fence across the field.”

“What happened?”

“I ran slap into it and the poor old *Skylark* folded up round me in a tangle of wire. As I struggled to get out I thought of planes catching fire, and . . .”

“Flying didn’t seem so good,” suggested Biggles.

“No.”

“How badly are you hurt?”

“Nothing serious. I gave my leg a bang and tore my face on the wire in my hurry to get free. I shall be all right when I’ve had a rest and a clean up. I see now what you mean about flying being all right while everything goes all right.”

“What about the *Skylark*?”

“I’m afraid it’s done for. Just a heap of wreckage mixed up with barbed wire. I sat on it for a bit and howled like a kid.”

“But the ground felt pretty good, eh?”

“Wonderful. I could hardly believe I was on it in one piece. The farmer came along. He was pretty annoyed. Said I’d scared his cows.”

“What did you say?”

“I said if his cows were as scared as I was he was lucky they were still alive. He calmed down when I told him I’d pay for the damage. I gave him my name and address.” Tony smiled bleakly. “I suppose I’m lucky to be here.”

“A pilot who can walk away from a crash must always reckon himself lucky,” answered Biggles. “I’m sorry in a way about the *Skylark* after all the work you must have put into it, but this is about the best thing that could have happened to it. You can now try a new angle of aviation by going out and clearing up the mess. That’s what pupils had to do in my early days. But no one minded that because we reckoned we were lucky to be alive to do it. And that goes for you, my lad. I take it you’ve finished flying for the time being?”

Tony smiled ruefully. “For some time, I’m afraid.”

“Then there’s nothing more to be said,” returned Biggles. “Now you trot along home and show yourself to your mother. No doubt she’ll have a doctor along to have a look at you. Here’s my card. Let me know how you get on. If you want any more advice you know where to come. Goodbye for now.”

“Goodbye, and thanks a lot for being so decent about all this,” was Tony’s last word as Biggles and Ginger walked back to the Auster.

HORACE TAKES A HAND

FOLLOWING a rap on the door of the Air Police headquarters a uniformed constable entered. Looking at Biggles he announced: "There's a lad below, sir, asking to see you."

Biggles looked up from his desk. "Didn't you tell him I was busy?"

"I did, sir. But he says it's important."

"Wouldn't he tell you what it was about?"

"No, sir. He says it's a matter for you, personally."

Biggles sighed. "All right. Bring him up. Warn him if he's wasting my time . . ."

"I understand, sir." The officer went out to return a few minutes later with a youth of about fifteen whose general appearance caused Ginger, who with Algy was working at the filing cabinets, to turn away to hide a smile.

He might have been a character from a funny school story, although this was offset by an air of quiet self-confidence. He was fair, pale, small in stature but neatly dressed and well-groomed apart from a fringe of lank hair which, hanging over his forehead, made him look rather like a prize poodle. Blue eyes gazed at Biggles through large, steel-rimmed spectacles, without the slightest trace of nervousness as he advanced to the desk.

"Good morning, sir," he began, in a clear well-spoken voice. "I hoped you would see me. You may be sure I would not have disturbed you had I not been in possession of certain information which will, I think, be of interest to you."

"Take a seat and tell me about it," requested Biggles. "Please be as brief as possible."

"Certainly, sir. Here are the facts. My name is Horace Wilberton and my home is Woolsden Hall, Glensden, which is a small village in Devon on the fringe of Dartmoor. I live with my mother. My father, who is in the Diplomatic Service, happens to be abroad, or I would have spoken to him before troubling you. My hobby is entomology. In the pursuit of variants of our local butterflies and moths I do a considerable amount of walking. On one such occasion recently I saw an aircraft and its pilot behaving in a curious manner. When the machine landed my first assumption was that it had been forced to do so by a mechanical defect, but subsequent events caused me to change my mind."

Biggles was smiling faintly. "What happened?"

"The machine landed on an expanse of short heather near a small wood. The pilot got out carrying what was obviously a fairly heavy parcel wrapped in either a mackintosh or a waterproof sheet. With this he disappeared into the wood. He was in it for half an hour. He then came out, cautiously as it seemed to me from the way he studied the landscape, and flew off."

"Did he see you?"

"No. I was sitting just inside the wood eating my lunch sandwiches."

"Did you recognize the machine?"

"Indeed I did. It was an Auster, registration letters G-AOSL. I should say that I paid no particular interest at the time. It was when the incident was repeated in precisely the same conditions a week later that I became suspicious."

"What were the conditions?"

"There was an unbroken cloud cover at about a thousand feet, as near as I could judge, for I do not profess to be an expert in such matters. That leads me to think the pilot must have known the landing possibilities were there, because for miles around the ground is very rough and broken. I should also explain that this is a lonely spot, miles from any house or road and therefore seldom visited except by a naturalist like myself."

"What was it that struck you as suspicious about this operation?"

"In the first place, I think, the behaviour of the pilot. He surveyed the landscape thoroughly before producing the parcel and taking it into the wood. And that he should do the same thing at least twice to my knowledge. I was under the impression that aircraft, except in case of emergency, are only allowed to land at official aerodromes."

"That is not entirely so. A pupil under instruction might practise forced landings. A machine having been abroad would of course have to land at a Customs airport."

"The pilot I saw was certainly not in need of practice. He must also have known that particular piece of ground was safe to land on. And surely a novice would choose a fine day, not a cloudy one, to practise forced landings? And why carry a parcel? Why leave it there?"

"Did you look for it?"

"Not seriously. I called the place a wood but it is really a dell-hole about a hundred yards long so packed with trees and scrub, mostly gorse, that it's hard to get into. The old shepherd who first showed it to me called it the Foxholes because foxes have their earths there."

“There’s no building in it?”

“Only a heap of stones and rocks. There’s a local legend about a hermit who lived there, ages ago. I saw the place once. It’s so overgrown with ivy and thorn bushes that you can’t see much. I never went again. I searched the dead trees and old stumps round the outside for grubs and other specimens.”

“How do you know the plane didn’t land there on fine days?”

“I don’t know, except that I’ve been hunting in the district for the past month. There were many cloudless days but I didn’t see the plane on those occasions.”

“Why do you think this pilot came on cloudy days?”

“Because he didn’t want to be seen. That’s only my opinion.”

“How far is this place from the nearest road?”

“There’s an old cart track about four miles away, but to the nearest motor road must be a good seven miles.”

Biggles smiled. “Thank you, Horace. You are, I perceive, an observant fellow. I suppose you didn’t make a note of the dates on which you saw this aircraft?”

“Oh yes. I noted them in my diary. They were the eighteenth and twenty-fourth of August.”

“Capital! Algy, make a note of those dates.” Turning back to Horace Biggles went on: “Why didn’t you report this to your local policeman?”

“Frankly, while he’s a likeable man and efficient enough on routine matters I was afraid he might not take my story seriously.”

“How did you get here?”

“By train.”

“And you intend going home the same way?”

“Of course.”

“How would you like to fly down to Devon with me?”

Horace opened his eyes wide. “That would be an enchanting experience. I’ve never yet been up in an aeroplane.”

“I haven’t time to wander about the moor looking for this place. If I flew you down you could show me the exact spot. That would save me a lot of time and trouble. I take it you could find your way home if I dropped you off there?”

“Easily. I go there often. Then you do think my story worth investigating?”

“Definitely. If the public would realize it they could help the police by reporting anything unusual. We can’t be everywhere. You have given us the registration of this machine. What colour was it?”

“Blue and silver.”

Biggles turned. “Ginger, you had better come with us in case I need help. Algy, ring the Ops room and order the Proctor to be ready in half an hour. Then check the ownership of this Auster, ascertain where it’s kept, and should it turn out to be a club machine get from the secretary the hours it has been in the air lately, particularly on the two dates Horace has mentioned. The logbook should tell us where it went—or where it was supposed to go. Come on, Horace, let’s get along and I’ll show you Dartmoor from up topsides. The prison should be a good landmark. By-the-way, do you live near it?”

“No, thank goodness. It can’t be very nice to know there may be an escaped convict prowling round your house. They’re mostly desperate characters who are sent to Dartmoor. We live about ten miles to the east.”

“Good. Then let’s go and have a look at it.”

In a little more than two hours later the Air Police Proctor was cruising in clear weather over the broad expanse of Dartmoor.

“Well, here we are,” said Biggles to Horace, who was sitting next to him. “There’s the prison, straight ahead. It’s an unmistakable landmark. Can you see your house?”

Horace, who had been studying the ground intently, answered: “Yes. And the wood, in the far distance. It’s that dark blob on the horizon. You’ll have to turn a little. Are you going to land there?”

“Of course.”

Another ten minutes and the Proctor had glided down to make a rather bumpy landing on a typical piece of moorland landscape; undulating ground, predominantly purple with heather, the skyline broken here and there by the grey outcrops of rock, known as “tors”, which are a feature of Dartmoor.

Biggles taxied close to the wooded dell and switched off. They all got out and walked up to it. Looking along the fringe Biggles remarked: “You were right about the place being a jungle, Horace. How do we get into it without tearing our clothes on this beastly gorse and blackthorn?”

“This is where I saw the man go in.” Horace led the way to the spot. “About here.”

Biggles pointed at a large slab of rock that stood on edge near his feet. "That's an unnatural position for a stone to fall. It couldn't have got like that by itself. I wonder could it be a marker, a guide to an entrance. Let's see."

"Be careful, sir," warned Horace. "It slopes down steeply towards the middle."

Shielding his face with his arms Biggles thrust a passage through the outer scrub, presently to call: "Come on. There's a path."

Ginger helped Horace through the tangle and then gazed in surprise at what was obviously a recently made passage down into the dell. That is to say, twigs had been cut with a sharp instrument and thrust to one side, leaving a narrow corridor.

"This is getting interesting," observed Biggles as, followed by the others, he followed the track down at a steep diagonal angle. At the bottom he stopped, peering ahead. "Hello! What's all this?" he asked, softly.

"It's the hermit's hole, but it wasn't like this the last time I saw it," asserted Horace, as they stood staring at a high mound of stone slabs. "It was flat. Someone has rebuilt it, and put a camouflaged waterproof sheet on top."

Biggles stepped forward. "Anyone there?" he called.

There was no answer.

They moved closer. Biggles removed some small pieces of rock that secured the waterproof sheet and drew it aside. Under it was another pile covered with a mackintosh. Under that was a brown blanket.

"I said the man carried a parcel wrapped in a mackintosh," reminded Horace.

Biggles lifted the blanket. For a minute nobody spoke. Then Biggles murmured: "What are we to make of this?"

Exposed to view was an old suitcase on which had been stacked a quantity of tins and jars, all of foodstuffs, biscuits, canned beef, and the like.

"After all our trouble it's nothing more than an arrangement for a camp or a picnic," said Horace, in a voice heavy with disappointment.

"That's just what it looks like," agreed Biggles, in a curious tone. "Let's see what's in the suitcase. Move the cans carefully so that we can replace them without showing signs of disturbance."

The cans were put on one side. Without moving it Biggles lifted the lid of the suitcase. Inside was a suit of clothes. On the clothes lay an automatic pistol.

Said Biggles: "In this country when going on a picnic it isn't usual to include a thing like that." He picked up the gun. "Loaded, too," he went on, pulling out the clip of bullets. "I'll keep these in case someone gets hurt," he concluded, putting the clip in his pocket.

"What do you make of it?" queried Ginger.

Biggles shook his head. "I don't know, but I could make a guess."

Horace spoke: "It's obvious someone intended to camp here, but why a suitcase with town clothes? And why *fly* the stuff here?"

"You told us it was miles to the nearest road," reminded Biggles. "Would you like to haul this stuff here on your back?"

"It would be a bit of a load for a long hike," admitted Horace.

"Apart from that someone might see you and wonder what you were doing."

"Would it matter?"

"It might."

"But who——"

"You seem to have forgotten where you are," interposed Biggles. "Well, now we've seen all there is to see we might as well go home. Let's put this stuff back as we found it and get along to see if Algy has any news of the Auster responsible for this dump."

This was done, after which steps were retraced to the Proctor.

"You won't want to come back with us to London, Horace, so you might as well start walking home," said Biggles. "Now listen carefully. Don't mention this to a soul and on no account come back here."

"Why not?"

"You might find yourself in danger."

Horace turned shrewd eyes on Biggles' face. "You have an idea about this," he challenged. "Having brought you here I think I have a right to know what it is."

Biggles hesitated. Then he said, seriously: "I may be quite wrong, but for your own good I had better tell you what I suspect. Anyway, as you say, it's really your show. A moment ago I said we must remember where we are. Where are we?"

"On Dartmoor."

"Right. And ten miles away there's a prison for desperate criminals. Once in a while, usually in a fog, one makes a dash for liberty. With every road for miles patrolled within a few minutes it isn't easy to get clean away;

but if such a prisoner had a hide-out to make for, with food available, he could lie low for days until the weather cleared and a friend arrived in a plane to pick him up. That would rule out having to use the roads; or, for that matter, the danger of trying to get overseas in a ship. A plane could take the escaped prisoner anywhere.”

Enlightenment dawned in Horace’s eyes. “Of course,” he breathed. “I see it all, now.”

“One day in the near future a man may come here. That’s why you mustn’t come near the place. That gun wasn’t put in the suitcase as an ornament. It gives us an idea of the character of the man for whom it was intended. If that man, or any man in the prison, learned that you were responsible for giving the plot away, there would be no more hunting moths on the moor for you; so keep your lips as tight as an oyster.”

“What will you do?”

“Take steps to see, should I happen to be right, that this plot doesn’t work. Now you trot along home. We’ll meet again, and I shan’t forget that you were directly responsible for upsetting this box of tricks.”

They shook hands. Horace started for home. Biggles and Ginger returned to their headquarters.

Back at the office it was found that Algy’s enquiries had produced information that went far to confirm Biggles’ suspicions. The Auster was privately owned by a Mr. Carlo Costino who held a pilot’s licence and housed the machine at a club in Somerset. He also had a criminal record. Part owner with a brother named Luigi of a shady night-club in Soho, the two men had been sent to prison for peddling dangerous drugs. Carlo had received a shorter sentence than his brother and was now free. It was significant that both had been sent to Dartmoor.

Biggles laid the facts before his chief.

The sequel occurred a month later much as he had predicted. In one of the sudden fogs for which Dartmoor is notorious Luigi Costino made a dash for liberty and reached the carefully prepared hide-out only to find police officers, who had been warned, waiting for him. Two days later, when the fog had cleared, Carlo landed with the obvious intention of picking up his brother. He was arrested on the spot.

The affair turned out to be more serious than had been thought. Luigi, in his fury at finding the police waiting for him at the Foxholes, believing his brother had tricked him, came out with the whole story. Carlo, he alleged,

had formed an “escape” club to which friends of criminals at Dartmoor were invited to subscribe, the idea being that arrangements would be made to provide a hide-out until the aircraft could arrive to pick up the fugitive and fly him abroad. On this evidence Carlo rejoined his brother in prison.

This ingenious plot might well have succeeded had it not been for a boy who went about with his eyes open and knew how to use his common sense. For the part he had played Horace received a letter of thanks from the Chief Commissioner of Police. But what pleased him still more, as he told Ginger later, was that he had been lucky enough to make his first flight with Biggles.

BIGGLES LEARNS SOMETHING

“COME in, Bigglesworth. I want you to look at this.” The speaker was Air Commodore Raymond.

Biggles pulled a chair close to the desk on which his chief now placed an enlarged photograph with the query: “What do you make of that?”

“Nothing remarkable,” answered Biggles after studying the photograph. “Looks like a high angle shot of a race crowd. I mean horse racing. You can see a bit of the track in the background.”

“Quite right. Recognize anyone?”

“No. Can’t say I do. Wait a minute though. That type with a beard looks like Plaudet, the French artist wanted by Paris for being mixed up in the Algerian trouble. We had a note about him from Interpol.”

“That’s the man. Andre Plaudet. One of those irresponsible youngsters who for reasons best known to themselves have taken sides with their country’s enemies. He was involved in a café brawl and got away after shooting two gendarmes.”

“You’re sure it’s him?”

“Compare this official photo.” The Air Commodore produced a head and shoulders portrait.

Biggles nodded. “It’s Plaudet all right. What’s he doing here?”

“Never mind what he’s doing. What I want to know is, how did he get here? He didn’t come in through any regular port of entry, sea or air, or he’d have been spotted. He’s on the wanted list. Yet here he is at Ascot races, of all places.”

“Who took this picture?”

“The B.B.C. They were televising. At such meetings they occasionally let the camera wander over the crowd. After the programme some person who wouldn’t give his name rang up to say he’d seen on the tele a criminal wanted by the French police. We got the B.B.C. to give us a private view of the film and the shot we have here is a ‘still’ from it. That’s all. Plaudet is in England. How did he get here?”

“How long since this happened?”

“A week.”

“What have you done about it?”

“The Yard has had plain-clothes men at every race meeting since, but he hasn’t shown up. He’s hiding.”

“That doesn’t make sense to me. Would a man in hiding be such a fool as to walk about in a public place like the members’ enclosure at a race meeting? Right in front of a T.V. camera?”

“He may not have known there was a T.V. camera there.”

“True enough.” Biggles thought for a minute. “I take it you’ve sent for me because you think he may have got a pal to fly him across the Channel.”

“It could happen. His pal could drop him off at some out-of-the-way place.”

“I’ve seen no reports from radar about unidentified planes. But there, that doesn’t mean much now that we have half the Fleet Air Arm’s helicopters patrolling the coast on the lookout for capsized yachts, swimmers who have got out of their depths and cliff climbers stuck half-way up or find themselves cut off by the tide. But there’s more to this photo than that. To get into the members’ enclosure at a race meeting you need a badge, and badges for Ascot aren’t easy to get. How did Plaudet get his? It’s hardly likely he’d be a member. That costs money. It looks to me as if someone lent him a badge, in which case he must have a well-off friend over here. That still doesn’t answer the question that puzzles me. Why did he go to Ascot?”

The Air Commodore smiled wanly. “You tell me.”

Biggles’ eyes narrowed. “He must have had a reason. When we know what that was we shall have all the answers. When was this photo taken?”

“June seventeenth.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Watch every race meeting. It’s reasonable to suppose that if Plaudet went to one he’ll go to others. There’s no need for you to worry about that. We’ll catch him. What I want you to do is examine every possibility of how he could have got into this country by air. If there’s a leak, a loophole, in our security precautions, it could be serious. It’ll have to be blocked.”

Biggles got up. “Okay, sir. I’ll do some thinking about it. Have you told Paris Plaudet is here?”

“Not yet. I don’t want them to think we’re getting careless.”

“You won’t mind if I tell Marcel Brissac on the quiet? I’d like to get more details about Plaudet’s habits—gambling, drinking, and so on.”

“As you wish.”

Biggles went back to his own office where, having given his assistant pilots the gen, he put through a call to Police Headquarters in Paris.

“*Bonjour*, Marcel, Biggles here,” he said, when he had made contact with his French equivalent. “Hold your hat. I’ve rung you to say Andre Plaudet is in England. He’s been seen but we can’t find him. To help us to know where to look I want you to tell me all you know about his personal habits—the sort of places where he drinks, gambles, amuses himself, anything that might give us a lead. Yes, I’m ready. Go ahead.”

Biggles listened for some minutes, making notes. When he hung up there was an expression of frustration on his face. “All that has done is cut the ground from under my feet,” he told the others sadly. “Plaudet never gambles. He’s never been to a race meeting in his life. He doesn’t drink. He’s only interested in art and politics. He says that in a book he once wrote about himself.”

“In that case what was he doing at Ascot?” asked Ginger.

“I wouldn’t try to guess,” answered Biggles, slowly. “I’ll speak to Inspector Gaskin about it. I imagine it’ll be his sleuths who are looking for Plaudet.” He went down to the detective’s office. “About this fellow Plaudet,” he began. “I’ve just been told he was seen in the members’ enclosure at Ascot last week.”

Gaskin scraped out the bowl of his pipe. “He hasn’t been to a race meeting since; I’ll swear to that.”

“What do you make of it?”

“Nothing.”

“I wonder could it be anything peculiar to Ascot? When’s the next meeting there?”

“Ascot Heath. Two days. July fifteenth and sixteenth. Don’t worry. If he turns up he’ll find us waiting for him. There’s a big meeting at Newmarket before that. We shall be covering all the meetings so you might as well forget about it. He’s bound to show up some time.”

“Paris says he doesn’t go to race meetings.”

“Then why did he go to Ascot? Play football, cricket, or something? Don’t give me that. He went to Ascot because the gee-gees were performing there. Leave him to me. When we’ve nabbed him he can tell us how he got here.”

Biggles nodded. “That suits me. I’ve plenty to get on with.” He went out.

Events did not line up with Gaskin’s confident prediction. Nothing was seen of the elusive Frenchman. The detective had men posted at the entrances to every race meeting but he did not appear.

“Beats me,” he told Biggles apologetically. “Why should he go to one race meeting and never to another? I’m beginning to wonder if I’m wasting my time. He hasn’t left the country.”

“As far as you know.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“He may have got out the same way as he got in. Plaudet was at Ascot on June 17. Why? There’s a reason for everything, and he must have had one. I’ve never been to a race meeting and I have a feeling it’s time I saw one. Where are they racing tomorrow?”

“Newmarket. First day of the meeting.”

“Are you going?”

“I shall have a look round.”

“So shall I. It’s not so much that I’m concerned with Plaudet. If people are getting in and out of the country as they like it can only be by air, and unless I stop it the Air Police will presently be taking a rap.”

“I suppose you’ll fly up?”

“Fly?” Biggles looked hard at the Inspector’s face. “Is there some place I can land?”

“There’s all the room in the world at most race courses. You’re behind the times, me lad. Quite a few people fly to race meetings these days, owners, trainers, and even jockeys when they have two engagements some distance apart on the same day. Why not? The middle of the average race course is as big as a small airfield. I’ve seen as many as a dozen planes parked on a race course.”

Biggles was looking at the Inspector with an extraordinary expression on his face. “The deuce you have. This is news to me. Of course, being all internal civil flying I wouldn’t hear about it. I seem to be learning something. You’re right; I shall certainly fly to Newmarket tomorrow.”

“You reckon to see Plaudet there?”

“No. I think that’s most unlikely. But I may see someone just as interesting. See you tomorrow. You’ll find me where the planes, if any, are being parked.”

“Better ring up the Clerk of the Course to make sure it’s okay for you to land.”

“I’ll do that.”

“You can come with me to Newmarket races tomorrow,” Biggles told Ginger, back in his office.

“What’s on your mind? You look as if you didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

“You’re right on the beam,” returned Biggles. “I’ve been thinking, how wrong can you be? In practically every illegal flying operation we’ve uncovered, the culprit, as one would expect, has made his landings in some quiet country field; wherefore one assumes that to be normal behaviour. Be funny, wouldn’t it, if a crook was smart enough to realize that and go to the other extreme by landing in the middle of a crowd of ten thousand people.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I may be wrong. Tomorrow we may know.”

* * *

The following day, a little before noon, Biggles, with Ginger beside him, landed the Air Police Auster aircraft on Newmarket Heath, close to two planes that were already parked there. Both were light transports carrying British registrations. A man in plain clothes, but wearing an arm band to show he was an official, was standing near, apparently to see that the machines were not interfered with. Biggles went up to him and showed his police pass as he had arranged with the Clerk of the Course. “Tell me,” he said. “Do you do this job regularly?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You must know most of the planes that regularly visit race meetings.”

“Most of ’em, sir, but not all. Not many gentlemen own their own planes. They hire them, with a pilot, from the charter companies. They come all sizes from helicopters to twin-engined cabin machines.”

“What about these two?”

“One brought Sir Francis Ringle, the whisky magnate. He lives up north. He’s got a horse running today. He once told me he gets here in under half an hour, whereas by road would take him three hours. The other belongs to Captain Woodside, the Irish trainer. He’s got two horses engaged.”

“Are you expecting anyone else?”

“I never know exactly who’s coming. I get a list from the office of the gentlemen who are expected but sometimes one or two more turn up. Baron du Fornier often pops over from France. They say he owns some useful horses. This looks like him coming now.” A grey-painted helicopter was circling, losing height.

While waiting for it to land Ginger said: “Here’s Gaskin coming over,” and the detective joined them just as the aircraft touched down. It carried

French registration letters.

“Anything doing?” inquired Inspector Gaskin.

“Not so far, but I fancy we’re on the right track at last,” answered Biggles. “If my guess is right Plaudet’s visit to Ascot had nothing to do with horses. He simply used the course as a landing ground, and the television camera just happened to catch him as he walked through the enclosure on his way out. If that’s right, someone is operating a nice little racket running a cross-Channel shuttle service for crooks.”

“Who’s this just landed?”

“According to the parking attendant it’s Baron du Fornier, a race-horse owner.”

A slow smile spread over Gaskin’s face as a man stepped down from the aircraft. Immaculately dressed, binoculars slung over a shoulder, a member’s badge in his buttonhole, and a newspaper in his hand, he looked what he claimed to be as he strode briskly towards the grandstand.

“Baron my foot,” growled Gaskin. “That’s an old customer of ours known in the jewel trade as Sharky the Card. We wondered where he’d got to. He always was a gambler. Imagine the nerve of it. Lives in France and comes over here for a day’s racing. I’ll take care of him. You carry on.” He walked away behind the self-promoted Baron.

Biggles looked at the aircraft. The outline of the pilot could just be made out, low in his seat. He appeared to be reading a book.

“What’s he doing, staying here?” said Ginger, softly.

“He must be waiting for somebody, or something. Stand fast while I try to get a dekko at his face.” Biggles strolled away round the tail of the machine. He was soon back.

“Know him?” queried Ginger.

“We know him all right,” replied Biggles, grimly. “It’s our old friend Laxter. You remember the ex-R.A.F. type who at one time was acting as second pilot for von Stalhein.”

“Do you think von Stalhein is behind this racket?”

“No. The money would be chicken-feed to him.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Watch for the next move.”

“You’re not going to pick him up?”

“No. Assuming he came from France all we have against him is making a landing outside a Customs airport. He’d get away with a fine. I’d rather take a chance to pick up some bigger game. I shan’t have to wait long.

Laxter won't stay here all night. He'll be anxious to get back to where he came from." Biggles went on tersely, "By thunder! Here's the answer coming now."

"Who is it?"

"Plaudet. The man we've been looking for all along. Apparently he's decided to go back to France."

"You'll nab him?"

"No. It'd save us a lot of trouble, extradition and so on, if he was picked up over the other side by the French police. You nip into Newmarket. Go to the police station. Call the Air Commodore and ask him to warn Marcel Brissac that Plaudet is on board a Sud-Ouest Farfadet Gyroplane, registration F-WBKL; apparently on his way to France. I'm following him in an Auster. I'll radio the course as soon as I have it and shall keep in touch until I see Marcel take over. Got it?"

"Right."

"Wait till we're sure Plaudet is going."

This was never in doubt. The Frenchman walked directly to the aircraft. Laxter, seeing him coming, put down his book and gave him a hand in.

The starter whirred.

"Okay. Off you go," Biggles told Ginger, and hurried towards his own machine.

The rest can be imagined. It all worked out as planned. Biggles took off behind the helicopter and, keeping well behind and above, shadowed it, an easy matter since the summer sky was clear of cloud. It flew a straight course, so that by the time the Channel was reached Biggles had plotted the track and transmitted the information by radio to Police Headquarters in Paris.

The rest was routine. Nearing the long sandy coastline of northern France a Morane dropped out of the sky to line up with the Auster, and Marcel Brissac's voice came cheerfully through the earphones to say he would now take over.

Biggles turned round and flew home, satisfied with the result of his day's work but not entirely happy that such a breach of air traffic regulations could have occurred without being suspected. It had obviously been going on for some time. As he told his chief later: "The trouble is, there are so many choppers cruising up and down the Channel these days that we can't watch all of 'em."

“Don’t let it worry you,” consoled the Air Commodore. “Gaskin has collected Sharky. Marcel has come through to say Plaudet and Laxter were picked up on a field in Normandy, so you shouldn’t again be troubled by that particular racket.”

“But it shows what can happen,” grumbled Biggles.

“Of course. We always knew that. That’s why we’re here,” concluded the Air Commodore, smiling.

DANGEROUS FREIGHT

“I SEE SAMMY MARSDEN has gone where the good pilots go. Bad luck.” Biggles, with the morning paper spread on his desk in the Air Police Operations Room, spoke without looking up. “I don’t think you knew him. I met him first in the war, when he commanded a bomber squadron. Recently he became chief pilot to General Air Transportation, a private concern based on Gatwick.”

“What happened?” Ginger asked the question.

“No details yet. The story is only in the stop press. Apparently the machine crashed in the South of France in the early hours of this morning.”

“What does this company do?”

“Charter work. Freight only. Specialized in livestock, although between-times I believe they made a good thing by importing out-of-season fruit and vegetables from West Africa. Sammy’s crew, second pilot and radio operator, went West with him.”

“On this occasion he seems to have been carrying a different sort of cargo,” observed Ginger, looking over Biggles’ shoulder.

“So I see. Gold. Forty thousand pounds’ worth if this report is correct. I hate the stuff. Trouble is never far away from it. But it makes news. Hence this splash in the stop-press column.”

“Did you know the company handled gold?”

“No. When I saw Sammy in the Aero Club a few weeks back he told me they were doing quite nicely with general merchandise. This is their third crash in six months, to say nothing of a machine presumed to have gone down in the Mediterranean. If it goes on they’ll be out of business.”

“What machines do they use?”

“Dakotas.”

“War-time stuff. They must be getting a bit wing-weary.”

“They must still be serviceable or they’d be grounded. Don’t forget the Dakota was one of the best general-purpose jobs mass-produced in the war. It was dogs-body for everybody and usually got through. Slow by modern standards, but robust, and that’s what counts in heavy haulage.”

“Did you know this company was carrying gold?”

“No. Why should I? For security reasons they wouldn’t shout about it.”

“Who runs this outfit?”

“A chap named Norman Bales. I knew him years ago. He still wears the old R.F.C. tie. With the company to run I imagine he now does most of his flying in the office, in a chair. He has a partner. I don’t know his name. I think I’ll have a word with Bales. You might look up his number and get the switchboard to put me through. I’d like the details, if only for our records.”

“Do you think there might be dirty work behind this?”

“I’m always suspicious when gold is in the offing.”

Ginger put through the call. Biggles took it. A long conversation followed in which he did most of the listening. Eventually he hung up, to look at Ginger with serious, thoughtful eyes. “That was a man named Langdon, Bales’ partner, I was talking to. Bales has flown down to the scene of the crash in his private Auster. The Dakota hit the ground in the Camargue about ten miles south of Arles. It was dead on course at the time. From the wreckage it must have flown straight into the ground.”

“Is there anything extraordinary about that?”

“Very extraordinary, I’d say. You’ve seen the Camargue, that fantastic delta of the Rhone. Umpteen miles of nothing, as flat as a pancake and nowhere more than seven feet above sea level. Sand, rough grass and shallow lagoons where the pink flamingoes breed. Why should a pilot of Sammy’s experience scatter his aircraft all over the landscape in a place where a pupil on his first solo should be able to get down even in the dark? Had he hit one of the high peaks of the Cevennes, farther north, it would have been understandable, if improbable.”

“There’s such a thing as engine failure.”

“Sammy would have got down with both engines stone dead.”

“Structural failure.”

“It would have to be something severe, and in that case the machine would have gone straight in like a brick. From the mess it must have struck almost on even keel. The engines were thrown clear on impact which no doubt explains why there was no fire. It’ll be interesting to know if the gold is all right. Langdon hadn’t heard.”

“Could Sammy have fainted—had a heart attack or something?”

“It’d be an astonishing coincidence if *both* pilots passed out at the same time,” returned Biggles cynically.

“I’d forgotten Sammy had a second pilot beside him. What are you going to do? Wait for Bales to come back?”

“No. He might not be back for two or three days, by which time the crash will have been tidied up. I’ll fly down and have a word with him on

the spot. You can come if you like. Algy can take over here when he comes in.”

Ginger smiled. “A little fresh air and sunshine wouldn’t do me any harm.”

“Right. Then as we shall be operating over his territory you’d better call Paris on the private line and tell Marcel Brissac what we’re doing. Say we haven’t time to call at the Bureau in Paris but we’d be obliged if he’d notify airfields on our route to save possible questioning. That should give us a clear road.”

“Okay. I’ll do that.”

A little more than three hours later the Air Police Auster was circling the scene of the crash. There had been no difficulty in finding it, for it lay scattered over two or three acres of open ground on a lonely waste that faded into distant horizons. A single road, obviously second class, ran north and south, linking Arles with the sea. There was only one house in sight, a farm, isolated and dilapidated, at the end of a short accommodation track, perhaps three hundred yards from the wreckage. Two white horses, of the Arab strain left behind by the Saracens centuries earlier, occupied a paddock. For the rest, a small herd of the half-wild cattle of the region grazed on parched grass. Occasional pools of water glittered under the sun.

Two cars stood close against the remains of the aircraft. Apart from police uniforms there were only two or three spectators.

Biggles landed, switched off and joined them. “Is Mr. Bales here?” he asked.

“I’m Bales,” said an elderly, well-dressed man.

Biggles smiled. “You’ve put on a bit of weight since I last saw you. Remember me? Bigglesworth of 266. I’m now at Scotland Yard, Air Section.”

Recognition dawned in Bales’ eyes. “I thought I knew your face.”

“I’ve run down to see if I can be of any assistance.”

“How did you know about this?”

“The morning paper. Your partner told me you were here.”

“I landed at Arles. The police brought me along.”

“What a mess. I gather Marsden was carrying a load of gold. I trust it’s all right.”

“I wish it was.”

Biggles' expression changed abruptly. "You mean—you haven't found it?"

"It isn't here."

Biggles drew a deep breath. "So that's it. Mind if I ask you one or two questions?"

"Go ahead."

"How many people knew about this shipment of gold?"

"Not more than was absolutely necessary."

"Then how did the newspapers know about it?"

Bales shrugged. "How do they get to know about these things? Possibly through the French police. They had to be told as soon as we knew the machine was down on their territory."

"Hm. Who found the crash?"

"The man who lives at the farm. There he is, standing over there. He didn't see it happen but he heard it. He ran out. Having no phone he saddled a horse and rode to Arles to tell the police. They came, and finding the logbook, phoned us."

"This is your third crack-up in six months. Were they all in Southern France?"

"No. One was in Morocco. The other was not far from here."

"What were these machines carrying?"

"Gold. The machine we think went down in the Mediterranean was also carrying gold."

"Did you lose the gold every time?"

"No. The machine that crashed near here was burnt out. The gold melted and ran under one of the engines. We recovered most of it."

"Do you often carry gold?"

"Not very often."

"These machines you lost. Were the crews killed?"

"Every time. There has never been a survivor to tell us what happened."

"Have you ever lost a machine carrying ordinary merchandise?"

"Never."

"Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"It strikes me as being thundering bad luck. After this I'm afraid the insurance people will refuse to cover us."

“You could hardly blame them,” said Biggles dryly. “Where does this gold start from? I mean, where do your pilots pick it up?”

“Accra, on the Gold Coast—or I should now say Ghana. It’s shipped by a firm of agents there to the Bank of England.”

“So the people who work in the office of the agents would know about the shipment.”

“I suppose they’d have to.”

Biggles looked round the widely scattered wreckage. “Is it known what time this happened?”

“According to the farmer just after four o’clock.”

“Did Marsden make a signal saying he was in trouble?”

“None was picked up.”

“Have you seen the bodies?”

“I had to, for identification. That’s why I flew down. They’ve been taken to Arles.”

“Did the police doctor find any wounds or injuries not consistent with the crash?”

“No.” Bales looked puzzled. “That’s a queer question. What else would you expect to find?”

“I don’t know. Gunshot wounds perhaps.” Seeing Bales’ look of incredulity Biggles went on: “It strikes me as remarkable that a man of Marsden’s experience could do this in flat, open country—if he was fully conscious. Engine trouble wouldn’t worry him. Admittedly, structural failure of the airframe might do it, if it was bad enough to cause the machine to break up.”

“The aircraft was all right when it left England and it would be checked at Accra before it started back.”

“By whom?”

“Our own mechanics. We have a staff in Accra, all ex-R.A.F. men, efficient and trustworthy. Does this imply you suspect foul play?”

Biggles did not answer the question. “I can think of only one alternative to structural failure. Marsden was not conscious, or not fully conscious, when he did this.”

“He had a second pilot, fully qualified, beside him. If Marsden was behaving strangely he’d notice it and take over.”

“Provided he wasn’t in the same state as Marsden.”

“Oh, come now, Bigglesworth,” protested Bales. “You’re not asking me to believe that both pilots could be taken ill at the same time.”

“Not unless it had been organized,” returned Biggles evenly. “I’m not asking you to believe anything. I’m simply trying to find a reason to account for what has happened. Had the gold not disappeared it would be a different matter. But you say it isn’t here. Obviously, someone has taken it, and ruling out the farmer who found the crash that implies several things.”

“Why rule out the farmer?”

“He couldn’t have known the cases on board contained gold; and had he discovered that, and decided to pinch it, he wouldn’t have been in such a hurry to fetch the police. But *somebody* knew there was gold in this aircraft; someone who knew the machine was going to crash; and, moreover, had a pretty good idea of where it was most likely to occur. That’s why your gold isn’t here now.”

“I didn’t look at it like that.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to, but it happens to be my job to be suspicious of events when they involve improbabilities. In this case, unless I’m right off the beam, there’s more to this than robbery. It begins to smell like murder—threefold.”

Bales shook his head. “It’s hard to see how the gold could have been taken. The farmer says he was on the spot in a matter of minutes. Who could have carried away the gold in such a short time?”

“Somebody did, and I reckon he had at least an hour. The farmer rode to Arles to fetch the police. He wouldn’t do that in less than half an hour. So by the time he had told his story and the police had got here at least an hour must have elapsed. During that period someone moved the bullion. Local men in the Camargue are few and far between, and even if by some remote chance one did come along at such an hour how could he possibly know what was in the packing cases? By-the-way, what are you doing with the bodies?”

“They’ve been taken to Arles. After the inquest they’ll be flown home.”

“Would you object to me asking the police surgeon there to make an autopsy?”

“For heaven’s sake! For what reason?”

“The crew would have a meal or a drink before they started. I’d like to know the contents of their stomachs.”

“Are you suggesting they might have been poisoned?”

“Or drugged. It’s a long shot. I’ve seen a lot of crashes and I can’t imagine experienced pilots doing this if they were fully conscious. I’m convinced somebody knew this was going to happen, and if I’m right that gold isn’t far away. For the moment it would be sufficient to get it out of the crash. It could be taken away later when the fuss has died down. A vehicle would be needed and a stranger would be spotted. Look at the country. There’s only one road. To the south it ends at the salt pans on the coast. In the other direction it leads to Arles. Would the thief go that way immediately knowing he’d meet the police cars and might be stopped? That’s why I feel the man who lifted the gold should still be in the vicinity.”

“I see what you mean,” said Bales slowly.

“Now if you’ll excuse me I’ll introduce myself to the police inspector and ask him if he minds me having a word with the farmer. He may have seen a stranger about.”

Biggles walked over to the officer and introduced himself, showing his credentials. After a few words on the situation he put his question about the farmer, whose name he learned was Vallon. The Inspector raised no objection, remarking that the man, a cattle breeder well-known in Arles, was above suspicion. He knew nothing about the gold, anyhow.

Biggles strolled over to the man in question. “I understand, Monsieur Vallon, that you were first on the scene of the accident.”

The farmer agreed, adding the information that he was in his yard when he heard the plane coming, very fast and very low.

“You were up early, *monsieur*.”

“I got up to see if I could help Monsieur Laroux mend his motor car.”

“Who is Monsieur Laroux?”

“A tourist who comes to make pictures of our famous red flamingoes. He arrived yesterday. His car had broken down and he asked me if he could stay until he had made the repairs.”

“When you heard the crash did he go with you to see what had happened?”

“But of course. We ran all the way. As his car was not working I said I would ride to Arles on my horse for help.”

“And he stayed with the plane?”

“Yes, to do what he could for the men if they were not dead.”

“Then you went to Arles and he stayed at the accident.”

“*Exactement, monsieur*.”

“Where was he when you returned?”

“In my barn, working on his car. As the men in the plane were dead there was nothing he could do for them.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the shed. He says the accident is not his business. He thinks only of the flamingoes.”

At this point the conversation was broken off by the drone of an aircraft. Looking up Biggles recognized the Morane flown by Marcel Brissac of Police Headquarters in Paris. He waited for him to land and greeted him with: “*Bonjour*, Marcel. You arrive at the perfect moment. This plane was carrying gold and it has disappeared. I may be able to tell you where to find it. Let us go to the Inspector from Arles. From what I say you will understand what I suspect.”

To the Inspector Biggles said: “Did you know that a stranger, a Monsieur Laroux, is staying at the farm?”

“*Mais non, monsieur*. Vallon did not tell me that.”

“He would attach no importance to it. When the plane struck the ground this man was already up and dressed, working on his car which, *he says*, has broken down. When Monsieur Vallon went to Arles to fetch you Laroux stayed with the accident. When the gold disappeared he must have been here. You follow me?”

The Inspector was frowning. “Who is this man?”

“He says he came to take pictures of the flamingoes, although, as we know, they are many kilometres from here.”

Marcel clicked his tongue, his eyes meeting those of the Inspector. “I think we will ask this Laroux some questions.”

“You might also look to see what he has in his car,” suggested Biggles. “Gold is heavy stuff to carry away in the pockets.”

“We shall see.” The Inspector beckoned two of his men and the party walked quickly to the farm. Laroux was there, in the barn, standing by his car. His face lost its colour and he moistened his lips when he saw the uniforms, as Biggles did not fail to notice.

Said Marcel: “You spend much time here, *m’sieur*. Do you wait for something?”

“I have trouble with the engine. It will not go.”

Marcel slipped into the driving seat and touched the starter. The engine came to life instantly. Switching off, without a word he went round to the boot. It was locked. He held out a hand to Laroux. “The key,” he demanded curtly.

Laroux made a dash for the open doors but the two policemen grabbed him. The key was taken from his pocket and the boot opened. There, in its original boxes, was the gold.

Marcel looked at Biggles, smiling whimsically. “Zut! Still the old fox. *Tch!* What a nose you have for gold.”

* * *

It need only be said that Laroux, faced with the guillotine for being an accessory in a murder plot, confessed everything, betraying the leaders of the gang with which he was associated. This revealed what Biggles had suspected. At their last meal in Accra the two pilots had been dosed with a slow-working drug, the action of which could be fairly well judged. The scheme was to bring the aircraft down in the area where a man would be waiting. It had not always worked. In the case of the machine that had gone down in the sea the dose had been too strong. On the present occasion it had been judged more accurately.

The instigators of the plot, who operated in Accra, were picked up in due course.

A ROUTINE JOB

AIR COMMODORE RAYMOND pushed across his desk, towards his chief operational pilot, a small blue and white packet. The seal had been broken. "Take a look at those," he requested.

Biggles looked inside the pack. "Cigarettes. What's wrong with 'em?"

"Take one out."

Biggles complied, and raised the cigarette to his nose. "Reefers, eh. *Marijuana?*"

"*Marijuana, hashish*—call it what you like, it comes to the same thing."

"What about it? Surely this is a nut for the Dangerous Drugs Squad to crack."

"They're working on it, of course. More important than the distribution of the stuff is to find out how it's getting into the country. That's where the traffic will have to be nipped. There's a suggestion that it might be coming in by air so I've been asked to cover that angle."

"Where did this packet come from?"

"Do you remember, a fortnight ago, a lad named Blake being murdered in the Lambeth Road? He was stabbed outside a coffee bar called Pepe's Place."

"I thought you'd picked up the kid who did it."

"Quite right. Boy of seventeen named Reeves. These were in his pocket. As you can see, the packet is one short. Reeves says he smoked it the night he did the killing. He was cocky enough at first, but when the effects of the drug wore off, and he learned that Blake was dead, he changed his tune and talked plenty."

"Did he know the effect reefers could have?"

"He was told they'd make him feel brave."

Biggles nodded grimly. "They seem to have done that. Did he say where he'd got this murderous stuff?"

"He says he bought the packet in Pepe's Place from a man he didn't know. Never seen him before. Describes him as a little well-dressed fellow of about twenty-five who spoke with a slight foreign accent. That's the best he could do. He swears he'd never smoked one before. Tried one as an experiment. It seems he had a grudge against Blake over a girl, and when he

left the bar he followed him and stabbed him. Didn't mean to kill him, of course. Swears he didn't really know what he was doing."

"Could be true. How much did he pay for this packet of death-dealers?"

"Two pounds."

"That was cheap."

"Cheap enough to make the possibilities all the more serious. If some rat is going round flogging reefers at two pounds a packet we can expect more trouble."

"I take it you haven't found this dope peddler?"

"We have not. If he saw Reeves' photo in the papers, realizing what he'd done he may have gone into hiding. He's probably only a small-time retailer, anyway. What we want to know is where *he* got this infernal stuff and how it was brought into the country. These packets weren't made here. The laboratory thinks they're French."

"Could some young fool on a trip to France have been talked into buying a few packets?"

"It's possible but unlikely. If that's the case, and we've only one or two packets to deal with, we've nothing much to worry about. If someone has worked out a scheme for importing them in quantities it would be a very different matter. What points to that is the way they're being sold. Usually, in the shady night-clubs, it's one at a time. Here's someone selling them by the *packet*."

"The Customs people don't object to anyone bringing in a couple of hundred cigarettes. In fact, most people stock up on the boat because they can buy them cheaper on board than ashore."

"That wouldn't be much use if someone is making a business of importing reefers. This packet was sold for two pounds. Let's suppose they can be bought in France for a pound. Ten packets of twenty are bought abroad for ten pounds and sold here for twenty. Out of the ten pounds profit someone has to pay the fare to and from the Continent. It wouldn't be worth the risk. Who in his right mind would chance a long prison sentence for ten pounds?"

Biggles agreed. "He wouldn't get away with it very often, anyhow, if he started making regular trips across the Channel. With passport officers, currency and Customs officials, anyone making the trip too often without a valid reason becomes suspect. Have you come across any more of this nasty brand of cigarettes?"

"A search round the clubs has yielded two empty packets."

Biggles pulled a face. "Not too good."

The Air Commodore went on. "We've got to assume this accursed stuff is being imported in dangerous quantities. How's it being done? All ports of disembarkation have been alerted. I want you to cover the air angle and lose no time about it."

"You think it's coming in by air?"

"In my opinion that's more likely than by sea. I'm not thinking of regular Customs airports because they would involve the same risks as seaports. A packet of the stuff weighs practically nothing. A light aircraft would make nothing of a thousand packets, and that would show more the sort of profit dope runners expect."

"I'll see what I can make of it," said Biggles, getting up.

Biggles returned to his own office where his three assistant pilots awaited him. "It looks as if we've got one of those dull routine jobs on our hands," he said. "We're shown a big haystack and told to find the needle." He explained the case as it had been put to him. "There's not a thing to go on but the chief seems convinced that the stuff is coming in by air. It's no use working the official airports. There are men there who can do that better than we can. They've been alerted. All we can do is check up on all other forms of civil flying in the hope of getting a line. I'll start here by going through the register of all privately owned machines. You can divide the country into three sections and work the clubs. You needn't bother with charter companies. No pilot having been overseas would risk losing his ticket by landing anywhere except at a Customs airport."

"What in particular do you want us to look for?" asked Algy.

"You know the drill. Check log-books for night flights, and any other flights of long duration. You needn't come back here every night unless you want to. If you don't, report by phone so I know where you are. The chief is right in this: if this stuff is being airborne, as the method has been successful so far, the operators will do it again. That's about our only chance of catching up with 'em."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ginger.

"After dark I shall tackle this end of the business, working the night-clubs and coffee bars in the hope of spotting the man, or one of the men, selling the stuff to kids. There may be more than one at it. For a bait I shall borrow that packet of doped cigarettes from the chief, put a few ordinary brands in it and flash it about to encourage the drug peddler to try to sell me

more. If I can find one of these wide boys he may lead me back to the headquarters of the gang. That's all for now. You've a lot of travelling to do so get on with it. If you should find a flying club secretary who refuses to co-operate let me know at once. I shall want to know why."

So the Air Police went into action on a task that promised to be more monotonous than exciting.

And that for three days was what it proved to be. Every evening Algy, Bertie and Ginger either returned home or rang up with the same report. Nothing doing. Not a clue, nor a hint of one. Biggles went through the list of private owners with a fine comb, but almost without exception could rule out every one as beyond suspicion. By night he hung about in clubs and coffee bars, specializing on those in the region where the murder had been committed, often exposing the blue and white packet that held the drug-loaded cigarettes.

It was on the fourth night, in Pepe's Place, a little after ten o'clock, that the bait hooked a fish. With the packet in his hand he had just pretended to take a cigarette from it when a man sauntered up to him with the request: "Got one to spare?"

Biggles looked at him. He was a seedy-looking individual of about twenty, carelessly dressed in a Teddy-boy outfit. His manner was nonchalant, but there was a hint of anxiety in it.

"You wouldn't like these, mate," answered Biggles, in a not unfriendly tone of voice. "They're special. I have to smoke 'em for my throat."

"Same as you," was the smiling reply. "I know all about it. I'll buy one off you. I'm out of stock. Can't think what's happened to Birdie. It must be close on three weeks since he looked in."

"Birdie?" queried Biggles, innocently.

"That's what I call him."

"Why?"

"Well, you know that tie he wears."

Biggles shook his head. "Funny, I never noticed anything special about it."

"He always wears that blue tie with little white birds on it. Maybe he didn't tell you, but he once told me it was always safe, in case he didn't turn up, to ask anyone wearing his old school tie. I reckon that was his little joke. All you have to say is, 'got a fag to spare, chum'—and Bob's your uncle. Now give us a smoke."

Biggles handed over a reefer. It was taken with a trembling hand. "I don't know about you, but I find this game's a bit expensive," he remarked.

"You're telling me! Can't help it. My nerves are all shook up. I have to have 'em whatever they cost." The speaker dragged on the cigarette, inhaling the smoke with obvious relief and satisfaction. "Ah, that's better," he breathed.

Biggles resumed. "Birdie may have run out of stock," he suggested.

"No fear o' that, or so he once told me. He can always get plenty."

"That's good to know, anyhow," returned Biggles.

The man moved off. "If you see Birdie ask him what he's a' doing of. Tell him I was looking for him."

"What name shall I say?"

"Charlie. He'll know who you mean."

"Okay," agreed Biggles.

He did not follow the man, realizing he was merely a local fellow who was using the drug, nothing more. The men Biggles wanted were those selling the stuff, not those buying it. However, he hadn't wasted his time. He now had something definite to look for—Birdie, or any other person wearing the blue and white tie.

He did not find him that night.

By morning he had made fresh plans. These were to call in Algy, Bertie and Ginger and, having told them about Birdie and the special tie, give them fresh assignments. He himself would spend his evenings in Pepe's Place. Bertie and Ginger were to watch from the police car. Algy was to remain in the office, by the phone, in case help was needed. "This may call for patience but it's all we can do," concluded Biggles.

And so it turned out, for it was three days before Birdie appeared in the coffee bar. There was no mistaking him. It seemed that others were waiting for him, too, and Biggles watched several packets of the doped cigarettes change hands before the man said he had no more but would fetch some.

Biggles was tempted to arrest the man as he left in the hope that under pressure he would confess where he was getting the drug; but on reflection he decided against it, because should Birdie prove tough and refuse to talk the contact would be lost. Instead, when the man went out he followed him.

The trail that followed need not be described in detail; it is sufficient to say that after a bus ride and a walk at the end it finished at a small but expensive-looking block of flats in Mayfair. A Rolls Bentley was parked

outside. Birdie walked straight in leaving Biggles to note the car's registration.

A police officer appeared from the shadows. "What's the idea?" he asked sternly.

"I was only admiring it," returned Biggles, innocently.

"You keep your hands off it." The officer moved on.

Biggles followed him to the next lamp-post. "Just a minute, officer," he requested softly, and showed his authority.

"Sorry, sir," said the policeman, quickly.

"That's all right. Do you happen to know who that car belongs to?"

"A Mr. Torini. He owns the swell club at the corner."

"Do you know him?"

"I wouldn't say that, but he's asked me to keep an eye on his car when he leaves it parked outside his flat. That's only week-days. He goes away at week-ends. Got a little place in the country, he once told me."

"Did he say where?"

"No. That's Mr. Torini, just coming out with another man."

Biggles looked and saw Birdie talking to a stoutish figure in evening dress. Presently this man got into the car and drove off. Birdie walked away.

"Thanks, officer," acknowledged Biggles. "Don't tell anyone I've been asking questions."

"I understand, sir."

Biggles walked on to the lush night-club at the corner. A uniformed janitor stood outside. Not being a member Biggles didn't attempt to enter. He returned to the Yard, where he found the others waiting for him. "We've got a step further," he told them. "Ginger, run through the card index and see if we have the name Torini on our books."

While Ginger was at the files Biggles narrated the result of his night's work.

"No Torini," reported Ginger.

"No matter. He's our bird. Why else should a man in his position associate with a type like Birdie? We know his car. It should be an easy matter to check where it goes at week-ends. Next time he goes we'll be behind him."

"What about Birdie?"

"We can pick him up any time. He's only a peddler. I wouldn't expect the big shot, who I fancy is Torini, to handle the retail side of the business.

To break up a dope ring you've got to hit it at the top, not the bottom. Don't forget this racket has already cost one lad his life, and another is in gaol. But let's get organized for Saturday."

"Are you expecting aviation to come into the picture?" asked Algy.

"I'm keeping an open mind about it. We may get the answer to that when we've seen the layout of this country cottage. If the stuff's coming from abroad I imagine there'll be an aircraft on the job. But we'll deal with that when the time comes. Let's leave it at that."

* * *

It was seven o'clock and broad daylight when the Bentley, with Torini alone at the wheel, left London, followed by two police cars. In the first were Biggles and Ginger. In the second, a special radio car, tracking them, was Bertie. Algy had remained in the operations room to take signals. He was also in radio contact with a car of the Dangerous Drugs Branch which was following the others at a distance, taking its course from messages sent out at intervals by Bertie. These were the officers who would handle the affair if it came to a showdown on the ground, Biggles' interest being only in the air.

At first the course was west, but it soon turned south as if heading for the coast, and this, in fact, turned out to be its objective. The Bentley, not stopping, made good time, and eventually, after passing through some hamlets known to Biggles only by name, reached the sea in lonely heath-like country where Forestry Commission notices warned travellers against the danger of fire.

The journey ended abruptly, near crossroads, where a picturesque old black and white cottage, looking as if it might once have been a public house, stood back from the road half hidden by an orchard. The Bentley turned into a narrow track that gave access to it. The police cars ran on, without slackening speed, until they were round the next corner, a matter of a mere hundred yards or so.

Biggles got out and surveyed the scene, now misty in the afterglow of sunset. In front lay the Channel, with a few big ships in sight on the horizon. To left and right undulating chalk cliffs, with here and there a narrow beach of shingle, kept the sea in its place.

"Now what?" murmured Bertie, as they stood by the cars. "I see nowhere near where an aircraft might land."

It seemed that the answer might be at hand, for within a minute, from a long way off, came the unmistakable clatter of a helicopter.

“I can see it,” said Ginger presently. “It’s coming along the shore line—pretty low, too.”

“Could be a naval coast patrol, looking for people cut off by the tide or something of that sort,” surmised Bertie.

“It won’t see much in this light,” remarked Biggles. “Whatever it’s doing that machine is too low to be tracked by radar.”

They watched. The helicopter came into sight, silhouetted against the sky, which made it impossible to read any registration letters it may have carried. Biggles did not need any. “That’s a Frenchman,” he muttered. “An *Alouette*. General-purpose job. What’s he doing over this side?”

Once, for a moment, when the machine was almost opposite, it dipped below the top of the cliff; then it reappeared, swinging out to sea, soon to disappear in the haze. By that time Biggles was running towards the edge of the cliff. Reaching it he lay down and looked over. “I thought so,” he said tersely, as the others joined him. Explanation was unnecessary, for it could now be seen that a little farther along, almost opposite the cottage, a section of the cliff had broken down. Over the rubble two figures were descending to the beach. Their purpose was not long in doubt, for on the water, close in, a dark object was being washed towards the pebbles.

“That’s it!” snapped Biggles. “This is where we move fast. Ginger, sprint back to the cars. Call Algy. Give him our position and tell him we need the Drugs Squad car here as quickly as possible. When you’ve done that slip along to the cottage, find the Bentley and disconnect the ignition. We’ll watch what goes on here.”

Ginger departed at a run, leaving Biggles and Bertie with their eyes on the scene below, where one of the men, having waded into the water, was dragging a bundle ashore.

“We’ll watch where they take it,” said Biggles. “If we jump them too soon they could pretend ignorance of what it contains, saying they’d found it lying on the beach.”

Taking cover, from a safe distance they saw the parcel carried to the cottage and taken inside. Some time passed. Then a man came out and put two suitcases in the Bentley, which was still standing by the front door. He returned to the house without attempting to start the car. More time passed. Then the Drugs Squad car arrived on the scene. Biggles explained the position.

“Let’s see what’s in those suitcases,” decided one of the officers.

This was soon done, and, as expected, they were found full of cigarettes in blue and white packets.

“Now let’s hear what they have to say about it,” said the senior anti-narcotics officer.

They went to the door and knocked. It was opened by Torini. His jaw dropped when he saw who was standing there.

Biggles spoke. “The game’s up, Mr. Torini. We know all about it. Your car’s out of action and the reefers are in it. If you’re wise you’ll come clean. That aircraft that brought the stuff here. Where is it based?”

“In France.”

“Where, in France?”

“Marquise, between Calais and Boulogne.”

Biggles nodded. “I know it.” He turned to the Drugs Squad officers. “I’ll leave this to you, now. I’ve something else to do.”

The “something else” was to return to the cars and call Algy at headquarters. “Algy, Biggles here,” he said crisply. “The birds are in the bag. Contact Marcel Brissac in Paris and tell him that a dope-running aircraft, a helicopter which I believe to be an *Alouette*, has either just landed or will shortly be landing at Marquise. Say we’ll be obliged if he’ll take steps to keep this bird in a cage for a little while. I’ll send him details shortly. That’s all for now. See you shortly.”

Biggles turned to the others. “That seems to be the lot. Charlie and those reefer-smoking smart boys at Pepe’s Place will have to learn to manage without their poisonous weed. Let’s get home.”

DAWN PATROL

GINGER hummed softly to himself as, on a routine patrol along the south coast, he flew a compass course at ten thousand feet between great billowing masses of cumulus cloud that were rolling in from the Atlantic. Checking his time by the watch on the instrument panel, he was on the point of turning his Auster aircraft to return to base when a grey shadow moving across a cloud below him caught his eye. Aware that only one vehicle can cast a shadow on the top of a cloud he banked slightly to bring the other aircraft into view, and observed that it was an Auster like his own. Checking its course he made it out to be northeast, which meant that it had come in from the sea, the English Channel.

Climbing into the eye of the sun to escape observation, he followed the machine that now shared the cloudscape with him, not with any deep suspicions but simply as a matter of interest, as a policeman on a suburban beat might keep an eye on a stranger behaving in an unusual manner. Having a little altitude to spare he “went downhill” until he could read the registration letters on the upper side of the plane which he had under observation. He made a note of them on his scribbling pad and continued to follow.

For some minutes the respective positions of the machines remained unchanged, the machine being watched keeping a dead straight course. This also was noted by Ginger on his pad. All this, it should be said, was normal procedure. It was simply Ginger’s job to take note of such things. So far, from anything it had done, the machine might be engaged in perfectly legitimate business. An even more likely supposition was that it was in the hands of a club pilot or pupil out on a joy-ride.

In life it is often the little things that turn out to be important, and thus it was when the machine being watched suddenly banked steeply, and turning on a wing tip dived into the nearest cloud.

Ginger’s lips came together. “He saw me,” he thought. “He must have spotted me in his reflector. And he didn’t like the look of me. What’s his idea?”

From now on the pursuit became a more serious matter, although in the event it led to nothing. The Auster had disappeared as completely as a stone dropped in the ocean. Ginger went down below the clouds and although he circled for some time he saw nothing of it. His mental conclusion was, if the pilot had gone out of his way to give him the slip, and he was fairly certain

that was so, from the way he had succeeded the man at the joystick was obviously no novice.

Temporarily dismissing the incident from his mind he finished his patrol, returned to base, made out his Flight Report and went on to his headquarters at Scotland Yard.

“Well, any news?” queried Air Detective Inspector Bigglesworth, his chief, from his desk, when he walked in.

“Nothing to get excited about,” returned Ginger, going over to a formidable array of record filing cabinets that occupied a large section of the wall. “You remember Marcel Brissac of Paris Sûreté calling us the other day to ask us to keep our aircraft at home unless they were prepared to comply with regulations.”

“I do. He was nice about it but he was serious.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“As I remember it a British light aircraft had twice been seen over France without any record of it having landed. Once it was picked up by radar, but on another occasion it was seen in daylight, hedge-hopping before crossing the coast.”

“The coastguards didn’t get its registration?”

“Unfortunately no, or we could have checked up on it. The machine was identified as an Auster, that’s all.”

“I may have seen the fly bird this morning. At any rate, I saw a machine, an Auster, come in from the Channel.”

“Why didn’t you follow it?”

“The smart boy at the stick didn’t give me a chance. I fancy he saw me. Anyway, from flying a straight course he suddenly made a beeline for the nearest cloud. But that wasn’t before I’d got his course and identification marks.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Check the files to see who the machine belongs to.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

Half an hour passed. Biggles looked up from the papers on his desk. “You’re a long time. What’s the trouble?”

“The trouble is, no Auster has been allocated the letters my bird was wearing. Nor any other type of aircraft as far as I can make out.”

“Have you tried the clubs?”

"I've tried everything, including the manufacturers' allocations of registration letters. Those I'm looking for aren't among them. I've double-checked, but the machine I saw doesn't exist—not officially, anyhow."

Biggles put down his pen and got up. "Oh, so that's how it is," he said quietly.

"I'll slip down again tomorrow and——"

"No use. If there's some funny business going on you're not likely to see him, anyway, not in the same place even if he's in the air. If this morning he got the idea he was being trailed he might even change his plumage. You say you got his course?"

"Yes."

"Then let's draw a line through it. By extending that at both ends we might get an idea of where he'd come from or where he was making for."

Ginger picked up ruler and pencil and went to work on the big wall map of the British Isles. "The southern end runs into Normandy," he reported.

"Well, there's plenty of open country there if a machine wanted to land. What about the other end? The fellow must have been making for an airfield of some sort."

"The only airfield near the route in the southern counties is that private club registered a few months ago at Listern, in Sussex. What did they call the concern? Airsports Limited, or something of that sort."

"That's right. I remember it. Started by some City gent for his son who had just retired from the R.A.F. He wanted to teach some friends of his to fly. Look 'em up."

Ginger went to the appropriate file, and in five minutes was able to announce: "Owner is a Mr. Otto Kleiner. His son David is secretary and chief instructor. Three aircraft, all Austers. No registration letters anything like those I saw this morning. I wonder could they have bought another machine without notifying the Ministry?"

"If they had, since the letters you're looking for haven't been allocated to the makers, you wouldn't be likely to find them."

"True enough."

"We can't let this slide," decided Biggles. "If this phoney machine is making regular visits to France without checking in at a Customs airport Marcel will get peeved about it."

"If it isn't behaving properly over that side it seems likely that it's giving Customs a miss over this side."

“That’s what I was thinking. I think we’d better slip down to Listern—just drop in casually—to see what goes on there—if anything. We won’t take the Auster you used this morning in case the pilot got your markings. Ring the hangar and have the Proctor pulled out ready. I’m going to have a word with Inspector Gaskin and ask him to find out what he can about Mr. Kleiner.”

* * *

In rather less than an hour the Air Police Proctor, carrying no signs of its official purpose, was on its way to Listern, which a little while later revealed itself to be nothing more than a very large field with a white chalk circle in the middle. At one end was a single hangar, carrying a windstocking pole, and, close by it, a wooden building in the manner of a cricket pavilion, presumably the club-house. The hangar doors were open. One aircraft, an Auster, stood just outside, with a man, the only man in sight, working on it.

Biggles did a circuit, landed, and taxied on to the club-house. By the time he had switched off and got down a man, a youngish good-looking man wearing grey flannel trousers and a tweed sports jacket, was standing on the verandah. He greeted them with a cheerful smile.

“Good morning,” he called. “We don’t often have visitors. Come in and have a drink.”

“Thanks,” acknowledged Biggles. “We were just waffling around and seeing your landing sign dropped in to stretch our legs and pass the time of day.”

“Come right in.”

“What is this place?” inquired Biggles, looking about him.

“Listern.”

“Club?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t appear to be very busy.”

“We’ve hardly got started yet. No doubt we shall pick up more members when the summer comes along—if we have any summer. By-the-way, my name’s Kleiner. David Kleiner. My guv’nor fixed me up with this show to keep me out of mischief.”

“Do you normally get into mischief?” inquired Biggles, smiling.

Kleiner grinned. “It has happened. You know how it is after seven years in the Service.”

“What are you flying?”

“Austers.”

“How many?”

“Three. I hope we shall need more.”

Biggles followed Kleiner into the club-house while Ginger, hands in pockets, sauntered towards the machine standing outside the open doors of the hangar.

“Don’t be long,” Biggles told him. “I’m only staying a few minutes.”

When Ginger rejoined him in the club-house he had seen all he wanted to see. Biggles and Kleiner were leaning on a small bar with drinks in front of them, talking, as pilots usually do, about aviation in general. Kleiner said he had done no flying so far that day but would presently be testing the machine standing outside as he was expecting a pupil along at any moment.

“In that case,” said Biggles, “we won’t hold you up. We’ll drift along. Thanks for your hospitality. See you again some time.” With a parting wave he and Ginger returned to the Proctor and took off.

“Well, what did you see?” asked Biggles, as soon as they were in the air on a course for home.

“Three Austers. None wore the letters I was looking for. They carry the letters shown in our files. But I can tell you this. Kleiner is a liar, if nothing else. He said he hadn’t been in the air today. The engine of the machine standing outside is still warm, so if he didn’t fly it somebody else did. She’s still dripping oil.”

“Ah,” breathed Biggles. “What was that mechanic doing?”

“I’m not quite sure about that. He looked as if he was giving the machine a wash down.”

“Fair enough.”

“Could be, except that he was using petrol or, from the stink, some sort of spirit. That seemed a dangerous game to me. One spark and the thing would have gone up in flames. I’ll tell you something else. Kleiner’s father must have oodles of money. Parked beside the hangar there’s a practically new Rolls Bentley. You don’t buy those with chicken-feed. At a couple of quid or so an hour for flying instruction Kleiner’s going to be a long time paying for that. If he’s so keen on flying why not run a small car and buy a man-sized aircraft with a few more horses under the engine cowling?”

“I think you’ve got something there,” agreed Biggles.

“What are you going to do? Watch him from up topsides?”

“I doubt if we’d get far doing that. We might hang about for weeks without seeing anything. Aside from that, Kleiner has done seven years in the R.A.F. That means he can really fly. He told me he’d spent some time as a blind-flying instructor, which means that clouds won’t worry him. But they’d worry us if we were trying to follow him. If he’s up to mischief it’s my guess he’d choose a day with plenty of cloud about, just the sort of conditions you struck this morning when you were out on patrol. We’ll get back and see if Gaskin has been able to gather any gen about Mr. Kleiner senior, or, for that matter, his son.”

* * *

As soon as he was back in his office Biggles buzzed Inspector Gaskin on the intercom telephone. The Inspector said he would come up.

His first words, when he walked in, were: “Why did you want to know about Kleiner?”

“Call it curiosity. What do you know about him?”

“Not as much as we’d like to know.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We’ve cast an eye on him once or twice. He runs one of those lush restaurant night-clubs in Mayfair and lives at a rate that doesn’t tally with what he tells the tax collector. He’s smart enough to keep proper books, but what does that mean when most of his business is ready money? Some queer types go to the place but it seems that unknown customers aren’t encouraged. We’ve had one or two complaints.”

“About what?”

“Overcharging for one thing. Do that and people don’t go back. But what we’ve heard doesn’t justify a police raid.”

“He has a son I believe.”

“He has two. One does something in Paris. I don’t know about the other.”

“I saw him an hour ago. He’s running a flying club in Sussex.”

The Inspector nodded thoughtfully. “Ah! So that’s where you come in.”

“It is. Just now you mentioned some of Kleiner’s regular clients are queer types. What exactly do you mean by queer?”

“Well, four of ’em at least are known to us as dope addicts. Two have been to gaol for it. Came out swearing they were cured; but in our experience where drug addicts go regularly there’s usually dope not far

away. Of course, we wouldn't find anything of that sort if we raided the place. Kleiner wouldn't be mug enough to leave the stuff lying about."

"Thanks, Gaskin. That's enough for me to work on," acknowledged Biggles.

"You think the stuff may be coming from France?" queried the Inspector, shrewdly.

"If it is it shouldn't be too difficult to grab it in transit."

After the Inspector had gone Biggles turned to Ginger. "This begins to line up," he averred. "One brother in France in touch with the dope traffickers and the other flying it to England in a machine with fake registration letters. How simple! Well, we'll see."

"You've still no clue as to when the flying takes place," reminded Ginger. "We can't watch all the sky all the time."

"But Marcel Brissac can watch the brother in Paris. Some time he'll keep an appointment with the other brother to hand over the stuff the old man is selling in his night-club—whatever that may be. If Marcel doesn't nab them over his side of the Ditch he has only to ring us here. When David lands he'll find us waiting. All we shall have to do is watch the landing field at Listern and jump in when he touches down."

Ginger nodded. "I get it. I'll have the Proctor alerted ready for action at quick notice."

* * *

It was a week later, early one morning, when the telephone beside Biggles' bed jerked him from sleep. Having listened for a few seconds he moved swiftly.

"That was Marcel," he told Ginger tersely. "He called the Yard and they put him through to me here. David and his brother met in a field near Evreux. Marcel just missed the machine but grabbed the brother. The machine is now on its way back. We should just be in time to meet it. Get cracking."

In ten minutes, without stopping even for as much as a cup of tea, Biggles' car was racing to the operations hangar. Half an hour later the Proctor was in the air, climbing for height as it headed for Listern. By the time the objective was in sight the Proctor was at ten thousand feet, circling, and quietly losing height on half throttle.

"I think we're in time," observed Biggles, looking down. "No machine on the ground and the hangar doors closed. You watch the sky to the south.

That's the way the Auster should come. I'll watch the ground in case it slips in low. I don't think they'll put the machine under cover until they've washed off the fake letters. That, I fancy, is what that fellow was doing when we landed here last week."

The Proctor continued to circle, not going too close to the landing field.

"I can see the Rolls by the hangar so Kleiner can't be far away," said Ginger. He went on quickly, "Here he comes. I saw a machine show for a moment against that front coming in from the Channel."

"It's an Auster, anyway," replied Biggles. "It's losing height fast. I think it must be coming in here. Watch him."

The distant aircraft grew quickly in size as it approached. From a dive it went suddenly into a steep sideslip.

"Aren't you going down?" Ginger asked Biggles. He looked surprised at the delay.

"Plenty of time. If he spots us he'll be off like a scalded cat for the nearest cloud cover, where we may lose him. I want to see him in a position from which it wouldn't be easy for him to get off again should he hear us. He won't while his own engine is running."

"He's going in," said Ginger.

"Then let's go down," returned Biggles, crisply, and cutting the engine went down in an almost vertical sideslip.

By the time he had straightened out and was making his approach the Auster had stopped close in front of the hangar. Ginger saw the airscrew stop. "He's switched off," he said. "He's getting out. He's heard us. He's looking this way."

"We've got him," replied Biggles confidently. "He won't dare risk a take-off from the position he's in, particularly as he has no reason to suppose we are what we are."

This prediction proved correct. Kleiner stood by his machine, watching, while the Proctor landed and taxied on, tail-up, to the hangar. Having switched off Biggles jumped down, closely followed by Ginger.

Kleiner's first words made it clear that he suspected nothing. "So it's you again," he said. "You seem to be in the deuce of a hurry."

"We were, but we're not now," answered Biggles, evenly. "I'm an air police officer and I have information that you landed in France early this morning without the customary formalities. I also have reason to believe that, having been abroad, you have just landed here without getting clearance at a Customs airport."

While Biggles had been speaking the colour had faded slowly from Kleiner's face, leaving it curiously white. But he kept his composure. "What are you going to do about it?" he asked, coldly.

"I'm putting this machine under arrest and I shall now search it for contraband. If you have no dutiable articles on board your offence may, I say may, be regarded by the authorities as a technical one. France may take a different view. If, on the other hand, this machine is carrying contraband your position will be much more serious. You are not compelled to say anything unless you wish to."

Kleiner lit a cigarette with a hand that shook slightly. "That's fair enough," he said. "I told my old man this couldn't go on indefinitely. I'm prepared to take my share of the blame but it was his idea."

"That's why he put up the money for the club?"

"He wouldn't have done it otherwise. Just as a matter of interest how did you get wise to this? Somebody tip you off?"

"No." Biggles walked round to the side of the Auster's fuselage. "These fake registration letters gave you away. No aircraft licensed in this country carries this set of letters. How did you manage it?"

Kleiner walked up close to the fuselage, and taking a small loose piece of fabric between finger and thumb ripped off a whole sheet, revealing the original letters underneath.

"I thought it might be something like that," said Biggles, quietly. "Now, do I have to search the machine or are you going to save me the trouble by showing me what you went to France this morning to fetch?"

"As you'll find it I might as well cut the agony," said Kleiner. He climbed into the cockpit and came out carrying in his hand a small carefully sealed canvas bag. He handed it to Biggles, who judged it to weigh about half-a-pound.

"What's inside?" asked Biggles.

"Heroin."

Biggles drew a deep breath. "Well, Kleiner," he said, "I won't tell you what I think of you for murdering people by inches with this infernal muck. But I will tell you this. You'll deserve the sentence the court gives you for this sort of racket."

Kleiner may have remembered these words when, a few weeks later, he and his father received long prison sentences.

THE TRICK THAT FAILED

GINGER stepped down from the cockpit of the Auster aircraft used for daily patrol work, and after a brief “She’s okay” to the senior maintenance mechanic, who was standing by, strode briskly to the Operations Room.

Biggles looked up from the desk at which he was working, and after a glance at the clock remarked: “You’re back early. Engine trouble?”

“No, the machine’s all right, but I’ve seen something you should know about. It may turn out to be nothing irregular so I didn’t feel like handling it on my own.”

“Tell me,” requested Biggles, putting down his pen and reaching for a cigarette.

“At six-five I was cruising on a course due west, keeping an eye towards the coast on the routine Kent to Devon run, when I heard London Airport Control in a proper flap. There was a fair amount of cloud drifting up so I’d tuned in to keep clear of cross-Channel traffic. I gathered some fool was barging about in a light machine right across the course of a Viscount coming in from Nice with a full load of passengers. They could see him on the screen but they couldn’t make contact to tell him to get out of the way. Either the fellow at the stick wasn’t fitted with radio, or wasn’t listening, or maybe his equipment was out of order. I don’t know about that, but the Control Officer was nearly in hysterics.”

“So was the Captain of the Viscount, I’ll bet,” put in Biggles, sympathetically.

Ginger grinned. “Probably a good thing his passengers couldn’t hear his language. The Viscount—I couldn’t see it myself—was at four thousand, so having climbed to six thousand to make sure I was well clear I started looking for the intruder. Five minutes later I got a glimpse of him as he dodged from one cloud to another, bearing west, at about four thousand.”

“What do you mean—dodged?”

“What I say. There were plenty of breaks in the overcast had he wanted to keep in the clear, but I saw him deliberately change course from one cloud to another as if he was trying not to be spotted by anyone on the ground. Having some altitude to spare I went downhill after him for a closer look. And I may tell you it wasn’t easy to keep in touch with this cloud-hunter.”

“What was the machine?”

“It was a low-wing cabin monoplane painted grey. Side-by-side seating.”

“What nationality?”

“Playing hide-and-seek I never got a fair look at his registration but the aircraft looked to me like a Jodel D 2.”

“French, eh. Forty-five horse Salmson radial engine.”

“That’s it. One of the type the makers sell in complete kits for amateur construction.”

“What was he doing on our side of the Ditch, I wonder?”

“Naturally, I tried to find out. Still popping in and out of clouds I tailed him, always heading west, but jinking as if he knew where he was going but wasn’t quite sure of where he was.”

“You don’t think he might have been lost?”

“If he was lost, all I can say is, he was going a queer way to get his bearings. Why stay in the murk? Anyway, when we got to the New Forest he began to lose height.”

“Sure he didn’t see you?”

“Not unless he had eyes in the back of his head. I was always in his blind spot under the elevators.”

“Go on.”

“Over the Forest he circled once or twice as if he was looking for some place to get down. At the finish he landed on a grassy patch with big timber on both sides. Having got his wheels on the carpet he didn’t stop, but carried on, nearly running into some ponies that were grazing there, and ended up under the trees. He must have tucked himself well under there, too, because after a bit, when I waffled back, I couldn’t see a sign of him from up topsides. That in itself struck me as suspicious behaviour for a pilot who had nothing on his mind.”

“I agree. Did you see the pilot?”

“No. I couldn’t see a sign of him. I considered going down to ask him why he had landed outside a Customs airport, but on second thoughts I decided to slip home to report.”

“He didn’t take off again?”

“Not when I was there. I hung about for a little while, keeping a fair distance away, but he didn’t appear. Actually, I didn’t expect him to take off again, because had that been his intention he would have left his machine in the open. It was the thought that he looked like staying there for a while that decided me to come home. I reckon he’s still there.”

“Were you ever able to check if this pilot had a passenger?”

“I wouldn’t swear to it but I think he was flying solo. I didn’t see him get out because he was under the trees and I didn’t like to go too close.”

Biggles stood up. “We’d better have a look at this to see what’s going on. There may be nothing to it, but it’s time someone told this fellow there are other people in the air besides himself. We’ll take your machine.” He pulled open a drawer and taking out an automatic pistol slipped it into his pocket.

Ginger looked askance. “Do you think you’ll need that?”

“I hope not, but if that Jodel has come from the Continent, as seems highly probable, the man in it could be anybody, or anything, from a smuggler to a criminal on the run. I can’t imagine any British club pilot risking the loss of his ticket for playing the fool on the traffic lines. You’d better bring a gun, too, just in case. . . .”

They went out, and were soon on their way to Hampshire in the Auster. The cloud front had gone through and the sky was now not more than three tenths covered.

“Keep your eyes open. He may be in the air again,” advised Biggles.

“There is this about it; he won’t get away from us if he tries to bolt,” said Ginger. “The top speed of the Jodel is only a trifle more than a hundred miles an hour. If I remember rightly, according to the book it needs a hundred and seventy-five yards to get off in still air.”

“I was thinking more about its endurance range,” returned Biggles. “With a limit of three hundred and seventy miles without refuelling it can’t have come from very far away. By the same token it can’t have much farther to go whichever way it travels, because from what you saw yourself the tank can’t be full.”

“He might intend to top it up.”

“He’ll have a job to get aviation spirit in the New Forest—unless . . .”

“Unless what?”

“Somebody brings him some. But that’s guessing. We shall know more about it presently.”

“That’s the place where he touched down,” observed Ginger, pointing. “Half left—between those trees. Watch out for the ponies. I see they’re back.”

“Nice spot for a picnic,” remarked Biggles, cynically. “I don’t see the machine.”

“That was the idea, or it wouldn’t have been put so far under the trees.”

Biggles lined the Auster for its approach, scattering the ponies, and without difficulty put it down on the rough turf. From ground level the other machine could be seen standing in the deep shade of the trees, although had they not thought it was there it could easily have been overlooked.

“It’s still there, anyway,” said Biggles, as with a short burst of throttle he ran on to get as near as possible. “The pilot isn’t about or he’d have been out by now to have a look at us.”

The Auster came to a stop. Biggles switched off, jumped down, and followed closely by Ginger walked purposefully towards what could now be identified unmistakably as a Jodel. It carried on the side of the fuselage the French nationality letter F. They halted when they reached it and looked around. Apart from the twittering of a few birds silence reigned.

“Nobody here,” said Biggles. “No use trying to guess where the owner has gone. All we can do is wait a while to see if he comes back.” He stepped up to examine the cockpit. Two minutes later he stepped down again. “Nothing,” he told Ginger quietly. “No log. No papers of any sort. No radio. Tank half full. One of these home-made jobs, I imagine, but that’s no excuse for not carrying identification papers. Make a note of the registration letters. If all else fails they should tell us who owns the machine.”

“Unless he’s got the logbook and his passport in his pocket we can assume he had no intention of landing at an airport, where they would have been needed,” stated Ginger. “Queer business.”

“If it’s as queer as I’m beginning to suspect, the pilot will take fright if he comes back and sees the Auster here,” opined Biggles. “You’d better take it away. Park it somewhere handy and walk back to me. You shouldn’t have far to go. There’s plenty of open country about.”

Ginger walked over to the Auster, got in, started up, turned it and took off. After circling he put it down on a pasture about half a mile away. Having run it close to the hedge he set off cross-country to rejoin Biggles. When he reached him, twenty minutes or so later, he found him seated on a fallen tree just inside the forest smoking a cigarette.

“Nothing doing?” he queried.

“Not a sign.”

“It begins to look as if he may not be coming back.”

“He’ll come,” asserted Biggles, confidently. “Planes cost money. The problem is to know what to do when he does show up. He’ll have a tale ready to account for his being here, you may be sure. With no evidence to disprove it all we can do is take his particulars and warn him he’ll be

reported to the French Aero Club for technical offences, such as landing outside a Customs airport.”

“He could say it was a forced landing.”

“We know differently. While you were away I ran up the engine. It’s giving its full revs.”

“If he’d collided with that Viscount there would have been a nasty mess.”

Biggles shrugged. “Had he done that he would by now be beyond the jurisdiction of any court. He wasn’t carrying a parachute. There isn’t one here, and he would hardly have taken it with him wherever he’s gone.”

An hour passed. Two hours. Three hours.

“I’m going to run out of cigarettes,” remarked Biggles. “I didn’t expect to be away all day.”

“I haven’t had my breakfast yet, never mind lunch,” lamented Ginger. “Could he have gone for petrol?”

“How could he get it here? There’s no road, and he couldn’t carry enough to make any difference. Had he wanted petrol he wouldn’t have parked at an off-the-map place like this. No, that isn’t the answer.”

It was after three o’clock before the silence was at last broken, and then by a sound which Ginger did not associate with the mystery machine. A woman laughed. Then a man’s voice spoke.

“Bird watchers or a picnic party,” muttered Ginger, disgustedly.

“They’re coming this way,” replied Biggles, softly.

Presently two people could be seen approaching through the trees. A man and a young woman; the man about thirty and the girl in her late teens. They seemed to be in high spirits.

“Here we are,” said the man cheerfully, as they walked up to the aircraft on the far side. “Did I keep my promise when I said I’d fetch you?”

“You did,” agreed the girl. “But I wasn’t expecting anything as romantic as this. A plane. How wonderful!”

The man’s face appeared above the fuselage. He was good-looking in a florid sort of way, with an outsize blonde moustache.

Biggles caught his breath. His hand closed on Ginger’s arm. “Now I get it,” he whispered. “You know who that is?”

“No, but vaguely——”

“It’s Rosten, the R.A.F. accountant officer who skipped about three months ago with his station payroll. About £12,000. He must have got to

France.”

“And has come back to fetch his girl-friend.”

“That’s what it looks like. I seem to know that girl’s face, too. Well, this is it. Watch me in case he turns nasty.”

Biggles got up and walked to the machine as the pilot and his companion came round to the near side with the apparent intention of getting into the cabin. The girl saw Biggles first, but, curiously, Ginger thought, far from showing alarm she flashed him a smile.

“Just a minute,” said Biggles.

The man spun round, the colour draining from his face. “What is it?” he asked, harshly.

“Does this machine belong to you?”

“What has that to do with you?”

“Does it?”

“Yes. It’s mine. What of it?”

“Where have you come from?”

“What business is that of yours?”

“I’m a police officer,” stated Biggles evenly. “I have reason to believe you’ve come from overseas and landed here without getting clearance at Customs.”

“I can explain that if——”

“You’ll have to, but not here. Do you want me to say any more now?”

The pilot’s face was ashen. “What—what are you talking about?” he blustered.

“You know what I’m talking about, Rosten,” answered Biggles. “You’re not getting into that aircraft. I was hoping you’d refrain from distressing the lady more than is unavoidable. Need I say more?”

Rosten started, his tongue flicking nervously over his lips. He drew a deep breath. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said slowly. Turning to the girl he went on. “I’m sorry, darling, but would you mind leaving me alone with this man for a few minutes?”

“I think you’d do better to go home,” Biggles advised her.

“But what’s all this about?” cried the girl, looking from one to the other. “We’re going to Paris to get married.”

“Flight Lieutenant Rosten already has a wife,” said Biggles.

For a moment the girl looked as if she was going to faint. Then, recovering, she ran off through the trees.

The moment she was out of sight Rosten whipped a revolver from his pocket. "I'm going to kill you for that," he rasped.

"Don't be a fool," retorted Biggles. "What sort of a skunk are you? That girl's going to take a crack when she learns the truth about you. Why make matters worse by getting yourself hanged?"

"Drop that gun, Rosten," ordered Ginger, who, seeing what was happening, had come up behind him.

Rosten threw his revolver on the ground. "Okay, you win," he said savagely. "I must have been out of my mind to come back to England, but _____"

"You weren't satisfied with the money you stole. You wanted to ruin an innocent girl as well. Who is she?"

"Diana Fulvers."

"The oil millionaire's daughter?"

"That's right. I rang her from a call-box and told her if she'd come down I'd meet her and we'd elope. She's in love with me," boasted Rosten.

Biggles nodded. "Now I understand why you risked coming back here," he said coldly. "More easy money. Where did you get this machine?"

"I bought it in France, second-hand. How did you know I was here?"

"You should have studied regulations before you crossed the Channel. Machines don't just come and go as they like any more. You might have crashed a Viscount carrying a full load. Where's the money you stole?"

"In France, what's left of it."

"Turn it in and you may get a reduced sentence," advised Biggles. "But we can talk about that later. Let's get along."

* * *

Rosten took Biggles' advice and revealed the whereabouts of the stolen money, for which reason he was sentenced to only three years' imprisonment.

A week after the trial Biggles received two visitors at his office, Otto Fulvers and his daughter Diana. Their purpose was to thank Biggles for saving them from a painful experience, for the girl now knew the truth about the man with whom she had imagined she was in love, and with whom she might have left the country with tragic results to her future.

THE CASE OF THE EARLY BOY

CHIEF INSPECTOR GASKIN, C.I.D., pipe in mouth, walked up to Biggles' desk in the Air Police office and without a word laid on it a necklace that flashed with all the colours of a rainbow.

Biggles picked it up and allowed it to dangle from his fingers. "Very pretty," he said dryly. "Is this a little present from you to me?"

Gaskin shook his head sadly. "Sorry, but my pay doesn't run to this sort of frivolity."

"Then why bring it here?"

"I thought mebbe you'd be interested to know where it was found."

"Where was that?"

"It was hanging from one of the top branches of an oak tree in Ashdown Forest. As diamonds don't climb trees they must have arrived there by air. That's why I'm here. Thought you ought to know."

"You seem very certain the thing was flown here."

"Couldn't have got here any other way. Not in the time. Less than twenty-four hours ago this little fortune was at a ball in Monte Carlo, hanging round the neck of a princess. In the early hours of the morning someone lifted it, with a few similar trifles, from the bedroom of her villa. We had a call from Paris to be on the lookout for them in case they came our way."

"As apparently they have, but not as one would expect. Who found the necklace?"

"A boy of fourteen. Son of a farmer who lives nearby."

"When was this?"

"This morning, just before six o'clock."

"What was he doing in the top of a tree at that hour?"

"Birdnesting."

Biggles smiled. "Boys will be boys. He must be a keen egg hunter."

"He had the sense to take the necklace to the police station in East Grinstead. They came through to me to ask if we knew anything about it. I sent a car to collect it. Thinking a plane might be involved I decided to come to you for expert advice."

"Where's this boy now?"

“In my office.”

“I’d like a word with him.”

“His name’s Tommy Scrimshaw. I’ll bring him up.” The Inspector went out to return a minute later with the young birdsnester. He looked somewhat dishevelled, but his eyes were bright and his expression one of supreme self-confidence.

“Tell me, Tommy,” began Biggles. “This tree where you found the necklace. How far is it from your house—well, your father’s house?”

“About half a mile, sir. Do I get the reward if there is one?”

Biggles’ lip twitched. “We’ll come to that later. Did you by any chance hear a plane during the night?”

“We hear planes all the time. Last night I didn’t hear any because I was asleep.”

“What were you doing out so early?”

“After the rain yesterday I thought there might be some mushrooms in our big pasture; but when I got there I found a man had beaten me to it.”

“You mean, he was mushrooming?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know what he was doing?”

“What else could he be doing? He was walking up and down, up and down, looking at the ground. He must have been there for some time.”

“How do you know?”

“The dew was still on the grass and there were tracks everywhere.”

“What did you do?”

“I walked towards the man to tell him he was trespassing on our land; but when he saw me coming he shouted at me to get to hell out of it.”

Biggles looked amused. “So you went?”

“Too true I did. He was a big man—too big for me to take on. Anyway, as the field had been well gone over I could see it was no use looking for mushrooms; so I decided to go to try to find the nest of a pair of jackdaws I’d noticed working in an old oak on the edge of the field. Jackdaws pinch the eggs of our hens that lay away from the farm. I expected to find a hole in the tree. Instead, I saw that.” Tommy pointed at the necklace. “It was hanging on a twig.”

“Did you find the nest?”

“No. I didn’t stop. I went home and showed my father what I’d found. He told me to get on my bike and take it to the police. Which I did.”

“Like a sensible chap. Was the man still mushrooming?”

“Yes. I looked at the field on my way to East Grinstead. He was still there then. I can’t imagine why because he must have got any mushrooms that may have been there.”

Biggles nodded. “He may have been looking for something else, perhaps something a friend of his had dropped. We shall have to find out.” Turning to Gaskin he went on: “We’d better run down and have a look at the general layout.”

“Can I give you a lift?”

“No thanks. I’ll fly down and meet you on the field.”

“I’d have thought it was hardly worth getting a plane out.”

“From the air I shall be able to judge the aviation aspect.” Biggles turned back to Tommy. “How big is this field you call the big pasture?”

“We call it the Twelve-Acre. That should tell you.”

“It should be big enough for a plane to land in if there’s nothing in the way.”

“There’s no stock on it at present.”

“Good. Then you go along with Inspector Gaskin, show him the field, then stand in the middle of it and wave your handkerchief when you see me come over in the plane. Right?”

Tommy nodded. “I get it.”

“Come on, laddie,” said Gaskin.

* * *

After they had left the room Biggles said to Ginger, who had been a silent witness of the interview: “Call the ops room and tell them to have the Auster ready.”

“What do you reckon happened?” asked Ginger, when they were on their way to the airfield.

“I can see only one answer to that. An aircraft flew over but it didn’t land. Had it landed the necklace wouldn’t have got into the tree. No. The pilot dropped the jewels to a man who was on the field waiting to pick them up. At least, that, I think, was the idea; but something went wrong.”

“But a man in a plane would hardly be such a fool as to throw a handful of jewels overboard.”

“Of course he wouldn’t. Not loose. They must have been in some sort of packet or container. There’s no doubt the field was the rendezvous, but, as I

say, something went wrong. I can think of several possibilities. It isn't as easy as some people may think to throw an object clear of an aircraft, much less to hit a target, particularly at night when this job must have been done. The packet could have got caught in the slipstream and broken open by being bashed against some part of the aircraft, probably the tail unit. Again, if the pilot misjudged his height, the slipstream or a gust of wind might have carried the packet into the trees where it was torn open as it fell through the branches. If the machine wasn't flying dead level, or turned too quickly, the thing might even have been sliced open by the airscrew. Long ago I remember getting a twenty-pound Cooper bomb stuck in the V of the undercarriage struts of a Sopwith Camel through being in too much of a hurry—and I wasn't the only one to do that. Even if the packet hit the field, unless there was some sort of check on it, say a miniature parachute, it would bounce and perhaps break open."

"But surely in that case the man waiting in the field would have found the stuff," argued Ginger.

"No doubt he would have found the container, but obviously he didn't find the jewels, or not all of them, or he wouldn't have been marching up and down when Tommy arrived on the scene shortly after daybreak. One thing is certain. The plan for a plane to drop the stolen jewels in this country came unstuck. So did the parcel, or the necklace couldn't have got caught up in a tree. We know the man on the ground didn't find it because we've got it. As that piece alone is worth a small fortune it's a safe bet that if the man isn't there at this moment, still looking for it, he'll be back to go over the ground again. But here we are," concluded Biggles, as he brought the car to a halt beside an Auster with its airscrew ticking over.

In a few minutes the aircraft was heading for Ashdown Forest, such a short distance away that Biggles did not climb to any great altitude but levelled out at a thousand feet. There was no difficulty in finding the right field because Gaskin, two police officers and Tommy were already there, standing in the middle of it, waving.

To land, however, was not so easy, because the pasture, apart from being nearly surrounded by trees, was dead square, and offered no long run in any direction. However, after making a couple of circuits to check his drift in the slight breeze that had sprung up, Biggles sideslipped in and taxied on to a corner of the field where he switched off under the spreading branches of a tree. As he remarked to Ginger as they got out, it was no field for a night landing, and probably explained why the jewels had been dropped.

They joined Gaskin, who told them there was no one in the field when they had arrived. He and his men had paced it for a few minutes without

finding anything. Tommy pointed out the tree in which he had found the necklace and they all walked towards it.

On the way Gaskin said: "I wonder why these smart guys chose this particular field?"

Biggles answered. "I'd say it's just the job. With trees all round, it can't be overlooked and it would be fairly safe for the man on the ground to show light signals to his pal up above."

Reaching the tree Tommy pointed to the branch on which he had found the necklace. They spent some minutes searching, without result, the grass and dead leaves under it.

Biggles studied the tree, an oak, obviously very old. To Tommy he said: "You say you didn't find the jackdaws' nest?"

"I didn't trouble to look for it after I'd got the necklace," explained Tommy.

"How would you like to find it now?"

Everyone looked surprised.

Gaskin frowned. "What's the idea wasting time?"

"I don't really want any jackdaws' eggs," said Tommy.

"Neither do I," Biggles told him. "You might find something else in the nest—you never know."

"All right," agreed Tommy, without enthusiasm, and set off up the tree.

Almost at once, with a flapping of wings a jackdaw burst out and flew away. After a short silence, Tommy, now hidden by the branches, called: "I can see the hole." A minute later there was a shout and he could be heard coming down so fast that Biggles warned: "Careful—you'll break your neck. There's no hurry."

Tommy dropped the last ten feet. His face was flushed with excitement. He thrust a hand in a pocket and then held it out. "Look!" he cried triumphantly. On his grimy palm lay a glittering bracelet and a solitaire diamond ring. "They were in the nest," he explained breathlessly.

Smiling, Biggles looked at Gaskin. "Now we know how the necklace got in the tree."

Gaskin stared. "How the devil did you know this stuff was in the nest?"

"I didn't know. I thought there might be something there. Tommy said there was a jackdaws' nest in the tree. Daws are great birds for collecting anything that shines or sparkles. The bird that picked up the necklace must have got the thing tangled on a snag and left it there. The daws must have

been on the job at the crack of dawn, as birds usually are. You know what they say about the early bird catching——”

“Quit fooling,” growled Gaskin. “What about the rest of the stuff?”

“It’s likely the man waiting here found it. But he must know he hasn’t got it all. Don’t worry, he’ll be back. He’s not likely to give up looking for swag that must be worth every penny of ten thousand pounds, knowing it must be about here somewhere. He isn’t far away. Probably gone off to get some breakfast. We shan’t have long to wait. As he might be here at any moment I suggest you get organized.”

“What do you mean—organized?”

“Place your men round the field, under cover, to intercept him whichever way he runs when he sees the game’s up and makes a bolt for it.”

“Yes,” agreed Gaskin. “That’s it.”

Arrangements were soon made. Tommy was sent home to be out of danger should the man, or possibly men, show fight. (It was learned later that he watched events from behind a hedge.) The constables were put in position. Biggles moved some distance from Gaskin, nearer to the aircraft, taking Ginger with him.

As Biggles had predicted, after everyone was in his place they had not long to wait. A man appeared from under the trees on the side of the field nearest to the road, apparently having got through the boundary hedge. Without the slightest hesitation he began quartering the field, his eyes searching the ground. Such was his confidence that he did not stop when Gaskin, who was of course in plain clothes, walked towards him. Only when Biggles and Ginger showed themselves did he pause for a moment as if in doubt. Then he carried on with his quest.

Said Gaskin casually as he neared the man: “You lost something?”

The man stopped. “No,” he answered with equal nonchalance. “I was hoping to pick up a few mushrooms.”

“What sort of mushrooms?” inquired Gaskin.

“What d’you mean? What sort? There’s only one sort.”

“Like these, for instance?” Gaskin held out a hand on which sparkled the bracelet and the diamond ring.

Considering the shock he must have had the man retained his self-possession remarkably well. “Where did you find those?” he asked. But his voice was now strained.

The Inspector wasted no more time. “I’m a police officer——” he began, but that was as far as he got. In a flash the man was racing back in

the direction from which he had come.

He had no hope of escape. The constables converged to cut off his retreat and he offered no resistance, presumably having decided to rely on bluff. "What's all this about?" he protested harshly.

"Better come quietly," advised Gaskin.

"You've nothing against me," was the reply. "I've as much right to be in the field as you have. Like I told you, I was only looking for a few mushrooms."

"Then why run away? See if he found any mushrooms," Gaskin told his men grimly.

With one constable holding the man the other went through his pockets. He produced several pieces of jewellery and the crushed remains of what had been a small white box with a streamer attached.

"Looks like your flying pal made a mess of things," observed Gaskin coldly.

The man looked dumbfounded, as he had reason to be. "How—how did you get on to that?" he stammered in a dazed voice.

"Let's say a little bird had something to do with it," replied the Inspector. Then, with a change of voice: "All right," he told his men. "Take him away."

When the prisoner and escort had gone he turned to Biggles. "You didn't seem surprised when the boy showed us what he'd found in the nest."

"I wasn't. In fact, I was half prepared for it. What had happened here last night, or in the early hours of the morning, had become pretty obvious. The man who threw the packet out of the plane didn't hit the tree with it, as I thought at first he might have done. The thing fell in the field all right, having been torn open by striking some part of the aircraft, with the result that the jewels were scattered on the grass."

"How did you work that out?"

"What else could have happened? There was nothing under the tree where Tommy found the necklace. Had the packet struck it and burst open the rest of the jewels would have been on the ground—and the container, unless it had got caught on a branch. But there was nothing. Just the necklace, hanging on a twig. How could it have got there? As it couldn't get there without help, somebody, or something, must have put it there. The man in the field wouldn't do it, so I was left with only one possible explanation—the jackdaws which Tommy had told us were nesting in the tree. Knowing these birds have a mania for collecting anything bright I thought the nest worth investigating. That's all there was to it."

Gaskin nodded. “You make it all sound nice and easy the way you put it now. When I get back to the Yard I’ll check to make sure we’ve got the lot, in case there are any more bangles lying about on the grass. Well, that seems to be all.”

“Not quite all,” disputed Biggles. “I have an interest in the plane that flew the stuff over.”

“Don’t worry about that. The man we’ve got will squeal when I get to work on him. I know the type.”

“Okay. In that case I’ll leave it to you,” agreed Biggles. “Let me know as soon as you can if you get a line on that plane and the man who flew it.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Then we might as well get along home,” concluded Biggles, walking towards the Auster. “I can’t see any mushrooms and I think we’ve done enough birdsnesting for today. The jackdaws did us a good turn so they deserve to be left in peace.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Biggles Flies to Work* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]